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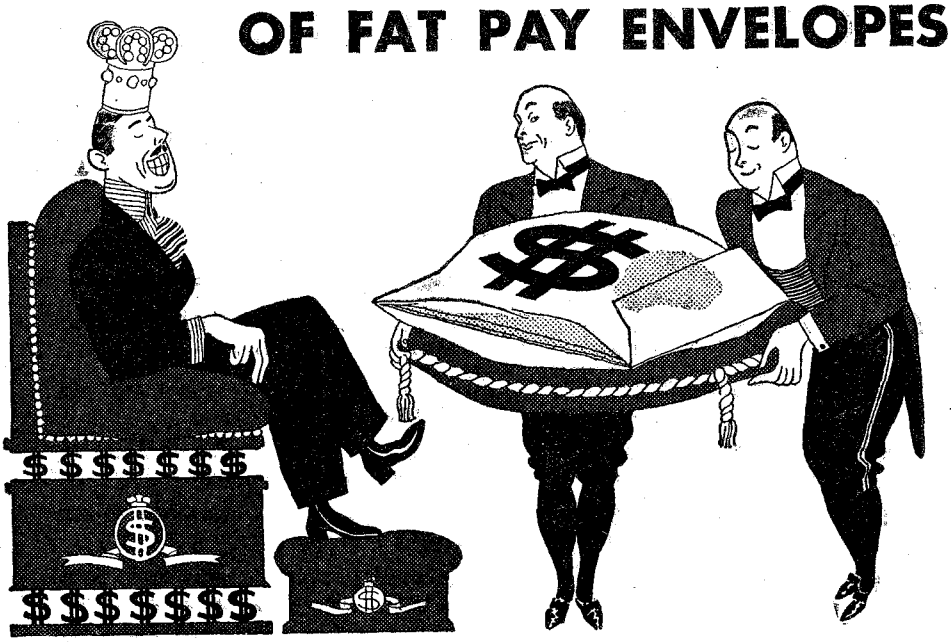

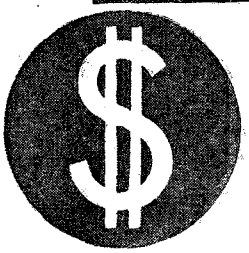

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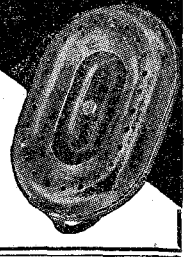

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Senor Coyote

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CHAPTER I

THEY CALL HIM SLIP

AT NOON Pollard owed the bank of Henry P. Foster five hundred dollars, but he owed it with a smile. That night Pollard had lost his smile, the bank had lost a lot of money, and Henry P. Foster had lost his life.

In the beginning, it was that confident smile of Pollard that surprised his friends. They sat in with him at the Royal Saloon and drank the beers he bought for them with his last dollars. The Royal is a comfortable place with ponderous old 'dobe walls that shut out the heat. The shadows that gather inside it are so thick that even the swing-door cannot let in shafts of light that penetrate to the heart of the place.

It is one huge room, with a bar that runs most of the length of one wall. To the rear are tables covered with green baize for the poker games. Other, smaller tables string along through the room, leaving plenty of open space for the standees at the bar; behind it stands Chuck Sladin, with a signed photograph of Robert Fitzimmons hanging above the mirror, and his revolver, as everyone knows, lying on the shelf before him.

Age has turned Sladin the color of stone and gathered the sunburn of his youth

They'd never seen anyone dance this way this silver-heeled girl could

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in a few blotchy freckles, but he still looks alert and aloof. He gave most of his attention now to the table where Pollard sat with Soapy Jones, Mark Heath, and Pudge McArthur. Soapy and Pudge had blunt, rubbery faces that would have been useful in a prize ring; but Mark Heath was young and straight and big and handsome enough to be any girl's hero.

Pudge McArthur kept saying, between drinks: "What's the main idea? Five hundred isn't much, but it's enough to let old Foster squeeze you out of your place. It's not the biggest place in the world, but you'll be doggone lonely without that shack to rattle a frying pan in and without that corral to stir up dust in. So what's the idea of that big grin?"

"I told old Foster to come up here and get his money at noon," said Pollard. He stopped smiling and laughed a little. "The money'll be here, all right. Listen to that banjo going by. I'll bet that's Tom Patchen. He's the banjo-pingingest dinge I ever heard. Push the door open and see is it Tom."

Somebody pushed the door open but the banjo player was out of sight. All they could see were the colored streamers that fluttered across the street, because San Jacinto was having a fiesta and when San Jacinto had a fiesta it dolls up right to the guards, because the people down there are fond of their town and they like to dress it up. Any other town that far west would have called the show a rodeo but San Jacinto called it a fiesta.

That town felt different and it acted different because it felt that *was* different. As a matter of fact the water-lily pads down there in the San Jacinto river are as big as the top of your table, and the flowers are bigger than your head, and the cypresses along the banks go slamming up into the air like thunderheads in the sky.

San Jacinto is mostly 'dobe, weakening at the knees but looking patient enough to stand there a couple more centuries; it has a big plaza with palm trees in the center and a white-faced church with a bell tower, and you can't tell whether you're in Old Mexico or New. There are eight and a half Mexicans for every American and eight of the Mexicans go around in sandals and homemade straw hats unraveling at the brim, with corn husks stuck inside the band for cigarette papers and a twist of tobacco for the makings.

San Jacinto *is* different, and the men inside the saloon enjoyed that difference while the door was open, because although the fiesta did not open up for a day or two, the people of the town already were tuning up for the show and you could hear guitars and banjoes *thwanging* and mandolins trembling all over the town.

WHEN the door closed, Soapy Jones, who was helping to spend Pollard's last dollars, said: "Loosen up, Frank, and tell us where that money is going to walk in from?"

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Mark Heath said: "*We* ought to find that money for Frank."

"Easy, easy!" cautioned Pollard. "No good guy ever has any money in his pocket."

This Pollard had a funny, good-natured face with a big Adam's-apple pushed out in front of his throat and a kink in the back of his neck to match it. You could trail him for a year and never see him take a quick step—or hear him speak a quick word, or a mean one.

"The whole of San Jacinto is gunna feel sick if you get frozen out of your place," Heath went on. "How much would I get for that Jasper of mine, that old cutting horse? How much you think, Pudge?"

"That Jasper looks kind of bad in the knees," answered Pudge.

"He can stand up to it all the whole branding season with any man's broncho."

"Yeah, but looks is looks."

"There ain't nobody going to sell his horse for me," put in Pollard, "because there ain't nobody needs to."

The others looked on him with affectionate concern. He took a drink and licked the beer froth off the edge of his lip. Then he said: "Is Slip Liddell good for five hundred bucks?"

"Hey! You know Slip Liddell?" exclaimed Heath. He was younger than the others and this news was more exciting to him.

"Kind of," said Pollard. He rubbed his red chin-stubble with the back of his hand and chuckled, a bit self-conscious. "I kind of know him, all right," he admitted.

"Is Slip Liddell coming here?" asked Heath.

"Right at noon, pronto," answered Pollard.

"That'll raise a crowd," remarked Heath, and pushed back his chair.

"You sit right still and keep it to yourself," cautioned Pollard. "Liddell sure hates a crowd."

"That's how he got his name, the way he can slip through a crowd," suggested Soapy Jones.

"No, no. He got that name from the way he can slip the cards when he's dealing black jack," objected Pudge McArthur.

"That's wrong," said Mark Heath. "When he was a kid he wasn't as big as he grew afterward and they called him a slip of a kid."

"A slip of dynamite, you mean," commented Soapy, and with his fat lips he sneered enormously and pushed his sombrero back on his head and scratched his bald spot.

"How come you and Slip are such friends?" asked Heath.

"Well, it was back there when he wasn't known so good; when he was doing a tramp royal around the world and driving the shacks crazy on every railroad from Mexico City to Juneau. He'd just begun to play cards and work out systems for roulette and faro and all that; and I saw him in that joint over there in Tucson—Matty White's place. This kid Slip—he wasn't any more than a kid, then—he steps up and cracks the roulette and he gets rolled for about fifteen hundred bucks and looks sort of bewildered. Then he kicks the croupier in the shins and turns over a couple of tables and breaks off the roulette wheel right at the floor. When he did that, you could see the apparatus under the boards. There was a brake, all right.

"A ruction started. Slip Liddell reached into the cash box and took a handful of money, but when he started to leave there was a lot of trouble. Some of the hombres hanging around Matty's place were hot stuff, in those days. So I made a noise and a bit of trouble by the front entrance and I drew a bit of attention from the strongarm boys, and the result was that Slip and me both got away. Without more than a few bumps we got away."

"I know Matty's place," observed Soapy Jones. "Lucky you both didn't die young."

"If I knew Slip that good," said Pudge, dreamily, "I wouldn't trade it for five thousand in spot cash!"

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"Sure," agreed Pollard, "and I've never touched him before today."

"Here's your banker," said Soapy.

BANKER HENRY P. FOSTER walked through the swing-door and stood at the bar, resting an important hand on the edge of it. He filled a whisky glass right to the brim, raised it with a sure hand, tasted it to make sure what he was getting, and poured it down his throat. After that he lighted a cigar, gathered it back in a big pucker in the corner of his mouth, and looked around the room. When he saw the men at the table he gave one nod to all of them. He said in his sharp, clear voice: "Well, Pollard?"

"It ain't noon yet," said Pollard. He added, under his breath: "The old beagle!"

He had no particular hatred for beagles. He hardly knew what they were. The word simply came to him.

"Suppose that Slip Liddell didn't come?" suggested Pudge McArthur.

"He never disappoints you," answered Pollard, growing nervous.

"Suppose he comes but don't have that much money?" said Mark Heath.

"Yeah, and whoever heard of him not having that much?" asked Pollard.

"There was the time he was down in Mexico and they slammed him into the hoosegow," began young Mark Heath.

"Yeah, that was a lot of boloney," said Soapy Jones.

Then a tall young man pushed open the door with his left hand and stepped inside. He stepped quickly out of the brilliance of the doorway and into the shadow of the wall.

"By Satan—it *is* Slip!" whispered Mark Heath.

CHAPTER II

HOLD-UP MAN

THE cut of him was like the cut of fifty thousand other cowhands and yet there was a difference that stopped the eye. Mark Heath put in a second whisper as he stared, saying: "Look at how he's set up like nobody's business!"

He was not as big and as strong as he appeared to the excited eye of young Mark Health but there was plenty of him, at that. You've seen his like in the picture of a football team. He was what we call "a good-looking mug." There was nothing beautiful about him. He was just a mug. But if he came into your house, your wife and your daughter would begin being foolish right away. He always wore a faint smile as though he had seen something pleasant and was still enjoying it.

As he came on across the room, it was plain that he had ridden those chaps through a lot of scratchy brush but somehow he didn't look as though he had wrangled many horses or roped many cows, recently. And as a matter of fact he had not. Except when he changed location, the toughest work he did was wrangling a pack of cards. The reason he wore that single mark of deep thought between the eyes was that he never played suckers. He preferred professionals perhaps bcause he had scruples about taking the money of the innocents, but even more because the professionals carried more hard cash in their wallets and would put it on the line.

Pollard was so glad to see him that he strode across the room and grasped his hand and started steering him toward the bar. Jimmy Liddell would not have that. He said: "But I want to meet your friends, Frank." That pleased the men at the table. It pleased Mark Heath particularly.

He gave Liddell's hand a tremendous grasp when it came his turn. Afterward, Liddell moved the fingers of his right hand one by one and made a pretended face of pain. "Your friends are too strong, Frank," he said, but he smiled at Heath and wrinkled his nose in a most friendly way. Then he ordered drinks. He was not loud about it but suddenly it became almost rude for anyone else to order a drink.

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Pollard could hold in no longer. He broke out: "Slip, I've got to have five hundred dollars!"

"Now?" asked Jimmy Liddell.

"Yeah. Right this minute," said Pollard.

"All right," nodded Liddell, and reached into the inside pocket of his coat. Pollard lay back in his chair and looked around him, triumphantly. The other men wore constrained smiles. They were wishing that they could have a chance to do a thing like that but they were wondering if they could be so free.

Pollard stood up as Liddell, under the shelter of his expert hands, counted out bills.

"I'm gunna lay it on the bar right under his nose and then I'm gunna tell him to go to blazes and how to get there," said Pollard. "The blasted old shark-skin, I'm gunna tell him what I think!"

"Tell who?" asked Liddell, lifting his head.

"That square-faced old son of a gun at the bar. Look at him!" said Pollard.

"I saw him when I came in," answered Liddell, without turning, and put the money back in his billfold, and the leather fold in his pocket.

"What's the matter?" asked Pollard.

"I have five hundred for you, not for your chum over there," answered Liddell.

"Yeah, but listen—Slip, I owe him the money—he'll foreclose on me," explained Pollard.

He was a big, bony man, as he bent over, arguing with both hands, making everything clear with the flat of his palms, he seemed to have an extra joint in the middle of his back. Liddell studied him with clear, undisturbed eyes.

POLLARD broke out into a sweat. "It's my house and my land, Slip!" he pleaded suddenly. "It's—it's everything. I got a hundred acres. I got a mule I harness up with my horse and plough the bottomland by the creek. I got some cows. I got a white man's chance the first time in my life."

"I told you a year ago that you were a cowpuncher, not a rancher," said Liddell. "You've lost five hundred in a year. You'd lose five hundred more the next year."

The other men leaned forward in their chairs, shifting their glances from face to face, hungry. This was news. This was a story for anybody. Their sympathy was for Pollard; with angry bewilderment they eyed Slip Liddell.

Pollard said: "I had a flock of bad luck. You don't understand. I had three of the fattest steers you ever saw and when that blizzard came in January they drifted against the fence line and there they were in the morning. You don't understand, Slip!"

His voice was hoarse.

"Yeah. I understand," answered Liddell. "Sit down and have a drink."

Pollard sat down, and just then big Henry P. Foster said loudly: "Well, Pollard? It's past noon, you know."

He was smiling a little as he spoke. There was even a sort of smile in his voice and you could tell how glad he was. Pollard only stared at him and then tossed off his drink.

"I'll send my men up in the morning," said Foster. "Just see that nothing is removed."

Pollard jumped up. He shouted out: "You're worse than a coyote! You're worse than a buzzard! You eat rottener meat!"

Foster turned a varnished crimson. He turned from the bar and came at Pollard like a real fighting man but then his eyes fell on Liddell and he stopped. He kept looking at Liddell as he made a backstep or two and then went suddenly out of the swing-door into the street.

"It's fun for him!" said Pollard. "Putting me out of his house is fun for him. I hope he burns and his money in his pockets. I hope he dies and is damned. I'd like to have the finishing of him."

Liddell said: "You mean some of that for me, don't you?"

Pollard fell wearily into his chair. His

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head dropped back and he looked sick.

"It was a swell sort of a little dump," he said. "I had a lot of swell times in it. I'd rather hear its windmill clanking and the water going plump into the tank than any other music that I ever heard. I'd rather be buried under those cottonwoods than in a churchyard."

Mark Heath remarked: "There oughta be something done about a buzzard like Henry P. Foster. Somebody oughta take him up in a big way."

That was when Pollard said what everybody remembered afterward. He said: "Yeah, I'm a poor sap. I only talk. I don't *do* anything about it. But I gotta mind—"

UP TO about three-thirty you always can get a check cashed in the First National at San Jacinto. The closing hour is three but there is half an hour of leeway and a lot of people are sure to come in at the last minute. It makes them feel that they are being favored. As a matter of fact there were four clients near the cash window at three-twenty that afternoon when a tall man, masked to the eyes, came in with a pair of Colt revolvers and held up the place.

The cashier was a fellow named Clement Stevenson with a big reputation. He was in that Perrytown bank in '27, when Sam Candy and his gang stuck up the place. Clem Stevenson pulled a gun and fought it out with them. They shot the legs out from under him and he still fought from the floor until Candy and his men had enough and lammed. With a hero like that inside the cage of Foster's bank, you would have thought that no robber could do a thing, single-handed; but as a matter of fact poor Stevenson simply put up his hands and begged the hold-up man not to shoot. Perhaps all the red had run out of his blood back there in Perrytown.

He was not a very experienced robber, or else he was a bit nervous. He could have had what was in the safe, which ran up to more than eighteen thousand dollars; instead, he took only what was in the cashier's cash drawer. Afterward, rumor fixed the loss at only twenty-seven hundred dollars. He took this with the heel of his left hand, without putting up his second gun, and pushed it down into a coat pocket just as Henry P. Foster came out of his office with a double-barreled riot-gun in his hands. The robber beat him to it by a comfortable fifth of a second. He put one bullet under Foster's collarbone and a second one right between his eyes.

Then he ran out and swung onto the back of a gray horse at the curb and galloped away around the first corner. People wandered around in confusion. They talked a considerable bit about outrages and the dilatory law. After a couple of hours somebody remembered the gray mustang that belonged to Frank Pollard, whose place was off on the edge of town.

That was enough to start them off. The sheriff didn't need to ask for volunteers. As a matter of fact the whole town wanted to be in on the show; fifty of the boys went out with Sheriff Chris Tolliver.

Pollard's shack stood on the edge of a deep gully, a big draw where the water ran with a rush in the spring floodtime.

The boys surrounded the other three sides of the cabin while the sheriff and a couple more went up to the front door. Perhaps Chris Tolliver made a mistake in saying why he had come. At any rate, the first thing they knew was a crash down the side of the gorge through the bushes.

They got there too late.

Frank Pollard had jumped right out through a window. He should have broken his neck, but the bushes broke his fall. He legged it down the windings of the draw into the dusk; and while the posse scattered and pursued and shouted and fired a lot of shots at shadows, only a few of them saw Pollard gallop away on a gray horse into the willows down by the creek.

They spent two days searching the willows but they never found Frank Pollard.

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IT MADE a good-sized bit of talking. A lot of people were glad that the banker was no longer with them but on the whole it was considered a slap at the reputation of San Jacinto and a black eye for the old town at the very moment when the fiesta was about to begin.

The bank itself offered a thousand dollars as a reward; and then some of the heartier merchants and ranchers around San Jacinto got together in town and built that reward clear up to five thousand dollars.

About three hundred of the lads went right out on the man-trail. But along came a sandstorm the very next evening and swept the entire crowd back into town with red eyes.

And when the next morning came, there was the opening of the fiesta and all that to think about so that hardly a single man-hunter remained on the trail that afternoon. Nearly everybody was out at the races on the fiesta grounds when Liddell rode into town with Pollard's gray mustang on a lead and went to the sheriff's office.

That office is in one of the few Jacinto buildings that is not of 'dobe. It is a small frame shack that started out as a school, turned into a grocery store, and wound up in the hands of the sheriff.

Liddell went up the steps and walked into the big, echoing, single room. It offered merely the imaginary privacy of corners for the clerk and the two deputies. Only the clerk was there with the sheriff on this day, and the sheriff was standing at the window looking out at the street.

This fellow, Sheriff Chris Tolliver, had that winey, sallow, sour Italian look about him, with plenty of end to his nose, bulge to his eyes, and pout to his lips. He had one of the biggest mouths you ever saw and the middle of the lower lip was always cracking to the raw so that it was a painful thing to see him smoke a cigar.

He turned now and said: "I see you found Pollard's horse."

Liddell nodded. He went over to the sheriff's desk. The clerk was standing up looking rather frightened.

Liddell took out a pair of spurs and laid them on the desk. They were expensive spurs, gold-plated except the rowel, that stood out at the end of a long spoon-handle curve.

"Kind of pretty," remarked the sheriff.

"Pollard thought so," stated the clerk.

"Did those belong to Pollard?" asked Sheriff Tolliver.

The clerk answered again, saying: "They sure did! I remember them fine."

Liddell laid an old-fashioned single-action Colt on the desk; then he paused to wink his eye and dab at them with a fingertip. He must have been through the thick of the sandstorm. The whites of his eyes were pink and he could not see very well.

"Here's the initials carved into the butt," observed the sheriff. "Did this belong to Pollard, too? I thought you were his friend?"

"Did you?" asked Liddell.

Some heavy footfalls came up the steps and across the porch where Liddell was squinting the water out of his eyes. The door was nudged open.

"Hey, look!" shouted the clerk.

The golden-bay head of a horse was looking in through the doorway.

"Is that your mare?" asked the sheriff. "Tell her to come on in."

"She's just a young fool," said Liddell, with disgust. "Come on in, Sis, while you're about it."

She came in. The floor was old and had a slant to it. Sis did not trust the creaking of the boards. She studied them with a lowered head, sniffing. She picked her feet up and put them down with intelligent care, like a good mountain-horse.

"And shut the door behind you," said Liddell, still with a face of disgust. "Where were you raised, anyway? In a barn?"

She turned, taking delicate care of her footing, and with a swing of her head she shut the door. Then she came to Liddell. When she reached him she uttered a little whinny, no louder than a man's chuckle.

"She's spoiled," said Liddell. "No mare

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has as much sense as a horse, and this is just a young fool that's been spoiled."

"I can see that," remarked the sheriff.

His clerk made a step or two away from his desk, grinning enormously with joy.

"Back up!" comanded Liddell.

The mare backed up half a step. She stretched out her neck and nibbled at the rim of Liddell's hat.

"Quit it!" said Liddell.

She quit it and tossed her head high in the air as though he had struck at her with his hand.

"She's spoiled a hat or two for me already," said Liddell. "I'm trying to get rid of her, but nobody wants her."

"Maybe not," agreed the sheriff. "Not at your price, maybe they don't. If there was an inch more on her legs, she'd be a thoroughbred."

"She has the inch more on her legs," answered Liddell.

He took a wallet out of his inside coat pocket and laid it on the desk. There was a thick wad of bills in it and through the lower part of the wallet and the bills drove a half-inch hole, or nearly half an inch.

The clerk swore.

HE HAD seen the blood on one side of the wallet that glued the greenbacks together. There was plenty of the dark stain on the yellow of the pigskin. The sheriff picked up the wallet.

"You aim to say that this is Pollard's wallet?"

Liddell said nothing. The sheriff opened the flap of the wallet and began to count the money inside, flipping the corners of the bills without withdrawing them. "There's twenty-seven hundred and fifteen dollars in here."

"That's what Pollard stole from the bank, isn't it?" asked Liddell.

"That's what the bank was saying yesterday," agreed the sheriff.

He took out a cigar and bit the end off it. He stuck out his tongue and moistened the ragged end of the cigar. Then he lighted his smoke while Liddell watched the crack in the middle of the lower lip.

"Where's the body?"

"In the San Jacinto," said Liddell.

"How come?" asked Tolliver, looking at Liddell with his tired, bulging, sour-wine eyes.

"I came up with him at the mouth of the canyon," answered Liddell. "After he dropped, I thought it was too bad to leave him out there for the coyotes—and the flies. The river was jumping and yelling its head off. I just rolled him down the slope."

"It was a fool thing to do."

"Why? He used to be a friend of mine."

The clerk made a face as though he had swallowed acid.

"A friend of yours—an old friend, wasn't he?" asked the sheriff, studying Liddell. He licked the crack in his lip and waited.

"There's a five thousand dollar reward, offered for Pollard," remarked Liddell, without the slightest emotion. "I'll take that along with me."

"Maybe you will," nodded Tolliver, "but just wait till I look the thing over, will you? The people that are putting up the cash will want to be dead sure that Pollard is dead. The bank will want to be sure, too."

"The bank won't care, so long as it gets its money back," stated Liddell, "and the rest of the people will take your word. Are you going to give it?"

The sheriff said: "Don't get tough with me, Slip!"

Liddell answered, smiling: "I never get tough with anybody."

The sheriff said: "All right. Only don't ever think that you can get tough with me. You can't get away with it."

Liddell was smoking a cigarette. He took a puff of the smoke in his hand and threw it gently toward the sheriff, still smiling. The smoke made a dim streak in the air to mark the gesture.

"Old Tolliver!" said the mild voice of Liddell.

Then he walked out of the office. The

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mare followed him; she went down the front steps gingerly and on the street below she cut a caper or two as though she were glad to be out of there.

The sheriff shut the door. He took out a handkerchief and scrubbed a sudden sweat from his face. He said to his clerk: "I thought for a minute the hellion was going to be tough with me."

The clerk, who was watching with a sick smile, answered: "Yeah, so did I!"

CHAPTER III

THE HOUSE OF THE SILVERSMITH

OUT there in the street, staring at Pollard's gray mustang and looking white around the gills, was young Mark Heath. He looked at Liddell with eyes that kept on seeing trouble.

"Has he come in and given himself up?" asked Heath. "Is he in there?"

"Who, Pollard? He's dead," answered Liddell.

"Dead?" gasped Heath.

He caught hold of a stirrup leather and leaned against the gray old mustang, and the mustang leaned back, a little.

"Did you like him a lot?" Liddell wanted to know.

"He was swell to me," said Heath. "He was swell to everybody, but he was fine to me. Did he have the bank's money on him?"

"Yeah. Twenty-seven hundred dollars."

"Twenty-seven hundred—"

"That's just what the bank missed."

"Sure. Sure. That's right," agreed Heath. "Only it seemed like a pile of cash for poor old Frank Pollard to get, all at once. He was a kind old boy, all right." He half closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths.

Liddell said: "You're a good fellow, Heath. I like you. I believe in you. That's why I'm sorry to tell you that I was the one who killed Frank Pollard."

He went off down the street and left Heath stunned behind him.

The mare followed Liddell. Now and then she pretended to be afraid of the flapping of the pennants and streamers that decorated the street, and breaking into a gallop she went a jump or two beyond her master and then turned and waited for his comments. He said: "You're silly. You're silly, is all you are." But she did not seem to mind these remarks.

From the far side of the town automobile horns honked and there was a rapid muttering of hoofbeats as the people came back from the races; the thirsty ones were traveling the fastest, but everybody was pretty thirsty. And there were ten horses to one automobile.

The way San Jacinto lies with only a bit of flat laid down in a junk heap of mountains, not much of 1938 can leak into the atmosphere. The only direction you can use an automobile is right up and down the river windings but if you travel toward any other points to the compass, a horse is better and a mule is best. That is why San Jacinto keeps its flavor like an old story which children love.

When there are two thousand more added to its population one of the big airlines intends to make it a stopping point so that air-tourists can get a glimpse of the old color, but probably San Jacinto never will add the needed two thousand.

It goes on living on sheep and goats and cattle and mules and burros and that sort of thing, though the Mexicans raise some good crops on the irrigated flats below the town. So when the population came in from the races at the fair grounds, most of it was aboard mustangs; they were what made the rapid drumming to which Liddell listened as he passed on through the town.

It was hard for him to believe that he was escaping all notice and now, in fact, he discovered a pair of people on saddle mules, following behind him, kicking their short-stepping animals into a trot to keep up with him. One of the two was an old man with a humped-over back and a gray spade of a beard and a long face, pulled out far in front. The other was a raggle-taggle youngster in blue jeans

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and a cap. It seemed apparent that they had recognized him but he turned out of the main avenue before they could overtake him.

THE streets of San Jacinto wind about as though they were laid out by the maundering leisure of grazing cows. They are narrow streets. In some of them two riders hardly can pass without touching stirrups. Liddell turned down one of the darkest of these alleys until he came to the shop of a silversmith that had a window full of silver wheelwork and other intricate spiderwebs of metal; there was even cloth of silver and gold woven by the wife of the smith.

Liddell went into the shop and saw in a corner among the shadows the immobile figure of the silversmith's wife. She was a pyramidal creature, declining upward from large hips to narrower shoulders which supported a head without the column of a visible neck. She wore a mustache of formidable black hairs. Her complexion was that of an old chamois which has been used for years to polish automobiles. Everything about her was gross, heavy, and static except her hands which seemed to have been kept delicate by the nature of her work. Her fingers were aflash with rings and she gestured a great deal when she talked.

Liddell said: "Juanita, I am very tired. Show me where I may sleep."

"Armando!" called Juanita. No emotion could struggle through the fat of her face but her voice went up a half octave with each word and her shoulders hunched as she repeated: "Armando! Armando!"

Armando Pinelli rushed out of the inner shop. He wore a leather apron and glasses. He was no bigger than a wasp, a dingy wasp that tunnels in the earth. When he saw Liddell he threw up both hands and cried out: "Saint Anne—Saint Mary of Gold— It is the *señor!*"

Juanita said: "Take him to the rear room where he can sleep. His eyes are sick, so call Dolores to put something on them. He is very tired, so hurry."

Armando Pinelli was all voice and hands as he led Liddell out of the shop through the cramped little courtyard where the paving stones were always as damp as winter, and so into the shed where a mule stood in a dark stall. They put Cicely, the bay mare, in the adjoining stall, and Pinelli took his guest across the court and into the house again. He was about to climb the stairs, but Liddell said: "A downstairs room, Armando. Any place will do. But the idiot mare grows lonely and has to have a look at me from time to time. Otherwise she grows nervous."

Armando was distressed. There was no place on the first floor worthy of a dog's kennel, he said; and in fact he had to show Liddell into a little room whose low, unshaded window opened on the court. There was a washstand in a corner and a ledgeless box-spring laid on the floor against the inner wall. Liddell groaned at the sight of it and fell flat. The springs creaked up and down again under his weight.

Armando, at the door, shouted: "Dolores! Dolores!" When he had no answer, he named two or three saints with a good deal of violence and shouted again. But it was not until three or four outbursts and until he had begun to bring in the name of St. Christopher, the patron of travelers, that a casual step came down the stairs. Her hands were still raised to her hair; and at the same time, with a girl's multiplicity of mind, she was arranging a lovely mantilla of black lace.

"Idiot!" said her father. "I haven't asked you to go out on the promenade! Why have you loitered to make yourself fine?"

"Do you think I want to look like an Indian squaw when I see *him?*" she demanded, without being in the slightest degree perturbed.

"How do you know it is he?" demanded her father with an instant suspicion.

"I heard his voice in the court," she answered. "Besides, for what other person in the world would you be rushing about and shouting?"

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"Ha?" said Armando. "Nevertheless, run instantly and get something to wash and comfort his eyes."

"*Dios!*" said Dolores. "Do you mean to say that he can't see me, after all?"

BUT she ran up the stairs again as lightly as a dancer, and when she came down again she was carrying a bowl of warmed water and cloths. Even with that to bear, she made an important entrance, holding the basin on her fingertips as though it were a precious vase, and crying out: "Señor Jimmy! Welcome to San Jacinto!"

He folded back one arm to lift his head and look at her. "I thought that I came here to sleep, but the fact is that all I needed was to see Dolores."

"The poor eyes—the poor eyes!" murmured Dolores. "Can you see me at all?"

"I can," said Liddell, "from your slippers to the beautiful shawl."

"Mother of heaven!" cried Dolores. "It is a mantilla of the sheerest lace—you are blind! My poor little old one!"

She sat down beside him on the box springs and began to wash his eyes with a small daub of cloth, uttering tender murmurings.

Armando Pinelli, who was a man of an intensely practical nature, appeared for an instant at the door to say: "That is good, my sweet. Be kind to him, but not *too* kind!"

A moment later, Dolores was explaining to Liddell: "My little father has no brains except in his hands and he uses all their wits on his silver. But what a day for me! To see you again when you are more than half blind and when I have on my new fiesta dress!"

"Tell me about it," suggested Liddell. "It's red, isn't it?"

"It is red," she agreed, "with little workings of gold through the pattern so that it shines and shadows in folds as the light runs over it."

"Dolores, it must be as lovely as an altar cloth."

"No. if you are going to open your eyes and stare, stare at me and not at a worthless dress. Now close your poor eyes again, and tell me what you saw. No, don't tell me!"

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because you will tell me the truth. And the truth is a terrible thing for a girl. I don't even dare to look into my mirror without smiling and fixing my eyes a certain way and tipping my silly head to one side or the other."

"I'll sing you a song," said Liddell.

"I'll get the mandolin, then," said Dolores.

"No. Give me your hand instead."

"So!" murmured the girl. "Ah, my crazy heart! It's doing a dance, Señor Jimmy."

He sang one of those old Mexican songs which are hard to translate because there is so much idiom in them. He sang it softly, and the words made a sense something like this:

The waterfall sings night and day
It throws up its white hands, rejoicing;
The currents are like wild horses
But after running a little way they stand still;
Their windy manes fall down;
The waters grow as quiet as ice
Because they wish to take, deeply, an image
Of a tree whose feet are close to the pool.
They take the whole of that slender image to the top
And show also the stars toward which it is pointing.

When he had ended, the girl still swayed a little with the rhythm of the music. At last she began to bathe the closed eyes once more.

"When you sing—" she said.

"Well?"

"When you sing it is not a very good voice."

"No. I'm only a campfire howler."

"It is not a very good voice, but it is as though you took my heart in your hands. Señor Jimmy!"

"Dolores?"

"If my mother were not so big and fat, would you marry me?"

"Dolores!"

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"If it were not for that black, horrible mustache, would you marry me?"

"Sweetheart—" said Liddell.

"No!" said the girl. "Don't answer. But you can feel with the tips of your fingers that *my* lip is smooth."

She leaned so close that he did not need to use the tips of his fingers.

"Dolores," he said, "you are more to me than—"

"Hush!" she broke in. "Everything is so beautiful inside me, just now, that one lie would break my heart. Now—let the big yawn come—and now you are comforted and ready for sleep. Ah, you men—there is not much priest in you."

She put small, wet pads over his eyes and arranged a bandage around them.

"When will you be hungry?" she asked.

"When I wake up," answered Liddell.

"When will you wake up?"

"When you leave me," said Liddell.

But as a matter of fact he slept on through the end of the day, through the twilight and the night, and into the crisp chill of the dawn.

CHAPTER IV

MEET SKEETER, FOLKS

AT THE end of the day there is a change in the Royal Saloon of San Jacinto. During the sunlight hours there rarely are any except white people in the place but in the evening Mexicans of the upper classes and even a few *vaqueros* come into the Royal to sit down to a poker game or play the roulette wheel.

For the first time during the day, wine appears. Chuck Sladin keeps good French wine in his cellar and he always has a supply of California, red and white; he even can produce champagne for great celebrations. With his grim, tired old eyes, like the eyes of an ancient eagle, he discourages arm-waving and loud noises so that the games at the rear of the saloon will not be too annoyed.

In the evening, also, the bar service is enlarged by Mexican waiters in clean whites who go softly about among the tables. An oddity is the way the Mexicans and the Americans keep apart and aloof even when they are rubbing elbows. The Spanish and the English language gathers in separate pools; Spanish and English eyes forget one another and seek only faces of the same blood.

The Royal did a good business, on this night, with Mark Heath at a table against the wall talking with Pudge McArthur and Soapy Jones. It was three in the morning, the hour when the tongue begins to stumble and repeat itself as alcohol commences to anaesthetize the brain. It was the time when maudlin good will enlarges the hearts of the drinkers, unbuttons pocketbooks and mouths, and pours mist into every eye. An inward, spiritual struggle was troubling the soul of Heath. At last he had his chin resting in both hands, his face almost covered by the fingers as he said: "This is what eats me: he makes poor old Frank love him, and then he shoots him in the back."

"How do you know he shoots Pollard in the back?" asked Pudge, opening his eyes and his mouth to express his astonishment.

"Why else would he have rolled the body down into the river?"

"I don't foller that," said Pudge, shaking his head.

"Listen, dummy," broke in Soapy Jones, who was the brains of the pair, "if he hadn't shot him through the back, why didn't he leave the body lie and let the sheriff go out and identify his dead man?"

"He says it was because he didn't want the coyotes and the buzzards to get at the body," protested Pudge.

"Sure he says," sneered Heath. "Go on, Soapy, and make it straight for Pudge."

"Look, flathead," pursued Soapy. "He comes up to Frank out there by the San Jacinto and he shakes hands and talks to him, and tells Frank about things, and pretty soon Frank turns his back and then this Liddell, this Slip Liddell, he sinks a bullet through the back of Frank's head."

"What a skunk this Liddell turned out

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to be. And me looking up to him all this time like he was something extra!" complained Pudge. "Sure, if he shot Frank through the back, he wouldn't want people to see it. He'd have that much shame."

"Yeah. He'd have that much," sighed Heath. "But will I ever have shame enough to do anything about it? Frank was swell to me. He took me in. He loaned me money. He set me up when I was flat. But I let him be murdered and then I let the murderer walk around and collect blood money for the dirty job!"

"It ain't your job to butt in," advised Soapy. "Me and Pudge have known Frank three times as long as you. The question is: What should we do about it?"

"Pull a gun and shoot Liddell!" suggested Pudge. The violent idea shocked him, and he showed the shock in his eyes. Their chance to develop this theme was interrupted, however.

THE same couple who had followed Liddell down the street—the old fellow with the long, pulled-out face and the ragged youngster who accompanied him—had entered the saloon and gone up to the bar. The old fellow carried an accordion under one arm.

"We don't want no free music in here," said Chuck Sladin, sternly. "And how old are you, kid? I don't serve anything under eighteen."

This brown-faced youngster, obscured by a cap that looked much too big for his head, turned to the old man and said quietly: "Well, Pop?"

"Go ahead. Show 'em how old you are," directed Pop.

In a moment, coat and trousers of blue jeans were tossed to Pop; the heavy shoes were kicked off the feet and replaced with dancing slippers; and finally the big cap followed the rest of the outfit, and let a bright bob of hair tumble out around her ears. She had on loose blue trousers and a blue silk shirt and around her middle she wore a red sash that took all the boy out of her and left only woman.

"Yeah, and what is it? A circus turn?"

Old Pop unlimbered the accordion at the same moment. He rocked it into a rippling, crazy, swinging jigtime and the girl began a tap dance.

Chuck Sladin leaned over the bar to watch her feet with critical eyes. He was not fool enough to turn a real attraction out of doors but he wanted no cheap panhandling in his place. It took him a long moment to decide; then he leaned back and began to clap his hands softly together to keep the beat of the music.

She really was good. She had no great weight to shift about and she was as supple as a blacksnake; besides, she had imagination in her feet.

In the bar that night there were a couple of lads from the Truxton ranch up in the hills. A radio gave them music on the long winter nights and when the range didn't leave them too tired they used to knock the frost out of their toes by tap-dancing, and when they heard the clatter of this girl's slippers it was too much for them. They came out with a couple of Indian yells and raised a good rattling thunder on each side of her.

"Go it, Skeeter!" yelled Pop. "Hop onto a table where they can see your feet!"

Instead of that, the Truxton lads pitched her up onto the bar and she began to sway and skip and ripple her feet up and down the bar, her slippers seeing their own way among the glasses and the bottles. Pop only made sure that those light slippers failed to scar his varnish and then he let the show go on. A thing like that was good for business. The Truxton boys got out of breath, but Skeeter was as tireless as a hawk on the wing.

She was not beautiful. When her face was still she looked as grim as any boy but she took care to be smiling and she knew how to let her teeth and her eyes flash. She knew how to put in the old appeal, too, and a hermit would have come right out of his cave to see Skeeter weaving into some of her warmer numbers; but all the while the cool little

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devil was taking stock of the men in the place and reading the minds of their pocketbooks.

She wound up with a bit that old Pop announced as "Saturday Night." The music for it was only a soft humpty-thumpty on the accordion, but the feet of Skeeter brought a galloping horse right into town, walked a cowpuncher into a drunken party, staggered him through a fight, gave a couple of pistol-shot stamps for his death, and finally followed his body to church the next morning with a demure piety that made even the Mexicans laugh till they cried.

After that, she hopped off the bar and went around with Pop while he passed the hat. When they came to Mark Heath, he put in a ten-dollar bill. The brown claw of Pop tried to close over that tidbit, but the girl's hand flashed in and got the money away. She stuffed it back in Mark's pocket and said: "Thanks, but I don't know you that well."

In spite of that they made a good haul of fourteen or fifteen dollars because the men in the place were heeled for fiesta spending; then they went over to a corner table with a couple of tall beers and Pop undid a package of lunch while Skeeter slid back into blue jeans and tucked the brightness of her hair under the big cap again. Nobody bothered her, either, because she had a way of taking an admiring glance out of the air and handing it back well frosted.

Only Mark Heath came over and tried to sit at her table. Old Pop was thinking of that ten-dollar bill and he pulled back a chair, but the girl said to Mark: "Don't you go and try to get yourself dizzy about me, handsome; because *I* am not getting dizzy about anybody, these days."

"Will you have a drink on me, then?"

"I won't have that, either," answered Skeeter. "You can't give me anything but love, baby, and I don't want that today."

SO HEATH went back to his table and people laughed at his lack of success; but the clumsy blue jeans and the cap swallowed her up so completely that presently she was almost forgotten, as she sat with her back to the crowd, digging her small, white teeth into a tough slice of yesterday's bread with a slab of bologna laid over it. She took big bites and chewed hard, and helped mastication along with a good swallow of beer from time to time.

She was the hardy one for you. She could turn her hand into a fist that meant something. She looked as light and strong as a jockey, and she was still stronger than her looks. Ten minutes before, half the men in that room were giddy and grinning about her, but now she was nobody's business except her own.

Old Pop had his yellow fangs in a sandwich and said through the bread: "Ten dollars! Ten dollars! You keep us in the gutter! You keep us in the dirt!"

"Listen, Pop," she answered, "I'd rather heist the dough than glom it off a kid like that when he's dizzy about me."

"Let them be dizzy, you fool!" directed Pop. "God made you—and you make men dizzy—and that's that! Use the gifts that God gave you, Skeeter."

He frowned at her.

"If I had a drop of your blood in me," said Skeeter, "I'd cut my throat and hang myself up by the heels to get rid of it. But shut up and listen to the talk that's going around. They're all talking about Slip Liddell. That *was* Slip that we followed today, then."

"Yeah," agreed Pop. "He shot a pal out in the hills and came back to town to grab the blood-money. That's what your hero done, and the boys don't seem to like it."

"I don't believe it," said the girl.

"Who cares what you believe?" demanded Pop. "I'm talking about the facts."

"You can't talk facts, poison face," answered Skeeter. "You hate everything too much to tell the truth about it. Slip Liddell . . ."

"He shot his partner in the back. The whole town knows about it."

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"He never shot a man in the back in his life."

"Yeah. You ought to know. You were raised in the same house with him," sneered Pop.

"I know what I've heard of him," she said. "I've seen the faces of some shacks that he'd worked on. I've heard the line they pull about him all the way from 'Frisco to the Big Noise. Listen, poison, he won't even play a sucker; he saves himself for the professional crooks and beats them at their own stuff."

"He shot Frank Pollard in the back for five grand," said Pop, and grinned till his teeth showed and his eyes disappeared.

"What made him Galahad to you, anyway?"

She replied: "Who do they still talk about up and down the line? He lived where he wanted to and he never hit the stem; he never battered privates. He was tramp royal when he wanted to travel. His hand was heavier than the other guy's blackjack. The cops and the shacks had chills and fever when they turned him up. He always had a limit and he always had it while the day was young. He never pulled a job; he never gave a pal the red lights; he shelled out to every sucker that was on the fritz; he never passed up a gal that was on the street without giving her a handout. And now you try to cross him up with me by saying that he shot somebody through the back? Listen, Pop, one of these days when you try to pull the poison on me like this, I'm going to take it on the lam, and then you can try to walk the cash out of the pockets without Skeeter."

"You're dopey about a guy you never saw," commented Pop, totally undisturbed by this outburst.

"I *have* seen him," said the girl. "I saw him today. I knew him by his picture."

"When did you ever see a picture of him?"

"Four five years back I saw it in a daily rag, somewhere. But I wouldn't've had to see his picture. I would have known him by the way he walked."

"How did he walk?" asked Pop.

"Like he was going somewhere," said Skeeter.

"You're nuts," said Pop.

THE voice of Pudge McArthur suddenly dominated the saloon. He was standing on a chair at the bar, ordering a round of drinks and making a speech as the liquor went down.

"We're not gunna take it!" roared Pudge. "We're not gunna lie down and take it!"

"We ain't gunna lie down and take it!" shouted an answering voice from the crowd.

That was Soapy Jones. The girl spotted him at once. Then she glanced over at the wall and saw Mark Heath still at his table with his chin on his fist and his eyes bright with calculation. She studied him with a bright curiosity for an instant.

"Nobody is gunna bamboozle San Jacinto!" bellowed Pudge. "Not even if his name is a big name. Nobody is gunna shoot a friend through the back and come in to get blood money. They can't put it over in San Jacinto. Not while we got so many good ropes in this town!"

"We got trees to hang the ropes on, too," shouted Soapy Jones.

"Who you talking about?" demanded Old Chuck Sladin.

"You know who I'm talking about!" answered Pudge. "And I wanta tell you that the dead man was a friend of mine. He was the kind of a man that he would give you his last ten cents, and he smiled when he done it. He was the kind of a man that he couldn't say no to a friend. He was more'n a brother to me. He was more'n a brother to the rat that shot him through the back."

"Name him! Name him!" called two or three voices. The others waited with faces prepared for anger and outrage, and Pudge McArthur roared mightily: "Slip Liddell—the crook—the gambler—the murderer. It's Liddell that I'm talking about. And there ain't guts enough to San Jacinto and there ain't ropes enough and there

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ain't hands to pull 'em, to take care of a skunk like Liddell. There ain't—"

His voice grew dim in the rising outcry of the mob.

Skeeter said: "Unlimber that accordion, Pop. Play something jolly. Play something that'll get into my feet. We've got to change the mind of these boys."

She was whipping out of the blue jeans as she spoke and tucking her feet into the slippers.

"Leave them be," answered Pop, grinning. "If he's as much man as you think, they'll do nothing but bend their teeth when they bite him. If he's as much man as you think, he'll blow 'em down faster than they can come up."

She said: "Get that accordion off the strap and hop lively or I'll never shake a foot for you again."

He obeyed, gloomily, and muttering: "It's a wrong gag to play twice in the same joint. They get tired of handing out the cash."

"They're not handing out the cash. *We* are!" she answered.

And a moment later she was at the bar rapping money on the edge of it, and calling for a drink all around. She hardly could make herself heard, for the anger and the resolution of Pudge McArthur had spread to nearly everyone in the room and they were beginning to mill like cattle before a stampede. Once they started spilling through the door into the street, nothing but more men and more guns could stop them.

There was no harm in having another free drink, however; and there was no harm in watching the girl clattering up and down the bar. To see her laughing made you think of every good time you ever had had in your life; it made your own toe start tapping and started your head nodding. And it was plain that there was nothing but good nature and merriment in her, for now she was buying another round.

When she jumped to the floor, Pop got her by the shoulder and shook her.

"Are you gone clean crazy?" gasped Pop. "Are *you* spendin' money when it's your job to make the others spend on *you?*"

"Shut up and make an accompaniment for those two over there who've started singing," directed Skeeter. "Keep on playing. Liven it up. Put a smile on that old leather mug of yours."

"Wait—" said Pop, but she was gone through the side door of the saloon before the others could notice her swift way in a crowd.

CHAPTER V

THE BUTCHER-BIRD

IT WAS not the cold of the morning that wakened Liddell, however, but a young voice that said: "Hi, Slip! Hi! You're overdue. Wake up!"

He pulled away the bandage and found his eyes almost healed from the effects of the sandstorm. Still a haze remained across them, slowly clearing, and through that haze he saw a slim figure seated in his window. A big cap slopped down over the head. The jacket and trousers were faded jeans. He saw a brown face weathered right into the grain of the skin. It was a sleek, slim youngster, almost too handsome, almost too effeminately light of wrist and hand.

"Who are you, brother?" asked Liddell.

"Skeet they call me. Or Skeeter, sometimes. You better be up and vamoose, Slip."

"Yeah?" drawled Liddell, making his head comfortable on the fold of his arm.

"Some old pals of yours are around smoking up trouble."

"What pals?"

"Those two fat-faced hams, Soapy Jones and Pudge McArthur. And who's that smooth guy called Heath?"

"Mark Heath? He's one of the best fellows in the world," answered Liddell. "He's a straight shooter and he's worth having for a friend."

"Is he *your* friend?"

"He'll never be my friend, I'm afraid," said Liddell.

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"He's making trouble for you now," she told him.

"What trouble?"

"Talk," said Skeeter.

"Where?"

"Up at the Royal all night. They're still there."

"What were *you* doing at the Royal all night?" demanded Liddell.

"I helped the barmen washing up and snitched a few beers. I'm not talking about me. I'm talking about you."

"I hear you."

"D'you want to know what they're saying?"

"I can't keep you from telling me."

"You won't be so upstage when I tell you. They're saying that you double-crossed your old partner. They're saying that you did in Frank Pollard. They're saying that you killed him when he wasn't looking—for the blood money."

"Did I shoot him from behind?"

"You did."

"Was somebody looking from behind a rock?"

"No. But that's why you rolled the body down into the San Jacinto; so that nobody could see where the bullet went in through the head and came out through the face."

"If I murdered a friend like that—they ought to raise a mob and lynch me," commented Liddell.

"That's what Soapy and Pudge are talking up. They almost got a crowd started before I left and came to tell you. They ought to be along in ten minutes. Maybe in less."

Liddell yawned. "I'd better be getting along, maybe."

"You better be!" declared Skeeter. "There's a bay mare walking loose in the court, here. You borrow her and light out. She looks as fast as a hawk."

"Sis!" called Liddell. "Hi, Cicely!"

The bay mare put her head in through the window. She seemed to be resting her chin on Skeeter's knees.

"Ready for another trip?" asked Liddell.

The mare shook her head.

"Couldn't you take me on just a little, tiny trip?" asked Liddell.

Cicely shook her head with an angry decision.

"Get out of my sight, then!" exclaimed Liddell. "Fine gratitude you've got for all the oats and barley I've poured into you!"

The mare backed away into the court yard again.

"How'd you do it?" asked Skeeter. "How'd you make her shake her head like that?"

"Why, I asked her a question and she answered it, that's all," said Liddell. "She's like all women. There's no gratitude in her."

"You're a funny sort of a guy, all right," observed Skeeter. "But maybe you'll feel less funny when they use you to stretch out forty feet of new rope."

"Maybe I will," agreed Liddell.

HE BEGAN to make a cigarette. His hands, using separate intelligences, found the brown wheat-straw papers, and the little white sack of tobacco with the big revenue stamp stuck on it. The fingers turned the paper into a trough, sifted in the tobacco, smoothed it, leveled it off, turned it hard, then engaged one lip under the other and rolled up the smoke. He glued it with the tip of his tongue, turned one end over, and lighted his smoke. But not for an instant did he give this bit of work his attention. He was saying: "How did you know I was down here?"

"There's a good beam end sticking out the stable window," remarked Skeeter, pointing. "That'll be better than the limb of a tree when they come to string you up. Wait a minute! You hear them now?"

In fact there seemed to be a swarming hum from higher up the street.

"They don't know where to find me, brother," Liddell pointed out.

"Everybody in town knows where you are and why you're here," answered Skeeter.

"Why am I here?" asked Liddell.

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"Because there's a gal in the house with hips and eyes that work together. Even the kids in the street laugh at her when she goes by; but everybody knows that when it comes to the gals you're a swell horse-trainer."

"You little pint of dishwater," said Liddell, sitting up. "I've got a mind to take you by the nape of the neck and pour you down the sink!"

"You big four-slushing ham," said Skeeter, "I've a mind to come down in there and knock the dust out of you."

Liddell leaned back on his bed with a sigh. "Breeze along, kid," he said. "Thanks for bringing me the news. Breeze along back where you came from. By the way, where *did* you come from?"

"That's my business," answered Skeeter. "You hear 'em coming, now? Slip, get up and out of here! There's thirty, forty of those bums and they're mean."

Liddell rubbed at the dimness of his eyes, but they wouldn't clear. There was something about Skeeter that was very unlike other people.

"How old are you, Skeet?" he asked.

"To hell with me," snapped Skeeter. "Are you going to lay right there and let 'em grab you?"

"Fourteen—fifteen—" said Liddell. "Where you live?"

"Wherever I find the living good."

"Are you on the bum?"

"Are you gunna be sorry for me?" asked Skeeter, with head tipped to one side.

"I'd as soon be sorry for a wasp or a butcher-bird, or any other thing that's small and full of teeth and claws. How long you been on the bum?"

"Listen, mug," said Skeeter, "I'm not one of the punks that batter the back doors and get the dog or a cold hand-out. I come in the front way and sit down to my ham-and—"

"You play a sob story and get the women mothering you, eh?" asked Liddel.

"Leave me out," said Skeeter. "There's a mob in this town that's going to have the hanging of you and like it."

"It's after five," answered Liddell. "If whisky started them, the booze will be stale and cold in 'em. If a man-sized dog barked at 'em, that whole gang would turn and run."

"You don't think you're taking a big chance?" asked Skeeter.

"No," answered Liddell. "A mob is like a mob of town dogs. They only chase the things that'll run away from 'em."

"It knocks me for a loop!" murmured Skeeter.

"Thanks for bringing me word," he said. "Wait a minute. Are you broke?"

"I don't want your coin," answered Skeeter.

"Why not?" asked Liddell.

"I ought to be doing the paying. You're putting on the show," said Skeeter.

"You're a queer little mug," yawned Liddell.

"I'll tell you something a lot queerer than me. Some of those thugs in the saloon are going to think you over when they're dirt-dry and stone-sober. And then maybe they'll oil up their guns and come for you. Maybe they're coming now."

"They won't come now," said Liddel.

"That fellow Soapy Jones, has he always hated you?"

"No. Soapy used to be a friend."

"He'd chew poison if he could spit it in your face now. He hates your heart, Slip!"

"Why shouldn't he?" asked Liddell.

"You mean, it don't bother you?"

"It bothers me, all right. Soapy is a bulldog, and he'll hold on."

"But you don't hate him for it?"

"Listen, kid. I killed the guy he loved."

"Everybody seems to've loved this Frank Pollard," remarked Skeeter.

"He was one of the kind that was always trying to help others and the poor sucker couldn't help himself," answered Liddell.

"How come you slipped the lead into him?" asked Skeeter.

"Don't you go through life being surprised by things. I'll give you some advice."

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"Shoot," said Skeeter.

"Get off the road; settle down. You'll never be more than half a man. You couldn't take care of yourself, in a pinch."

"The heck I couldn't," said Skeeter.

"What you use? A knife or a blackjack?"

There was a silence.

"You settle down. You're going to be one of those slim sizes all your life. Learn stenography. Get off the road."

"I'll be darned if I sharpen pencils all my life," declared Skeeter.

"You're a fresh sort of a kid," said Liddell, sleepily. "I don't know why I like you. But you get off the road and settle down. I'm telling you."

"It's okay. It's okay," muttered Skeeter. "But leave me out of this. The point is, there's a gang in this town that'll never rest easy till they shoot the wishbone right out of you. Why don't you get out?"

"Maybe I will. Right now, I'm sleeping," answered Liddell. "So long, kid. Thanks for coming."

He closed his eyes.

"Okay," nodded Skeeter. "I've just tried to get some sense into you. When you wake up and find things have happened, remember me. I tried to make you move with common sense."

"I'll remember. Good night," said Liddell, and turned his face to the wall.

CHAPTER VI

RIDE INTO THE DESERT

AFTER that interruption, Liddell slept on into the warmth of the morning. Then he took a bath and sat down to a breakfast of toast and Mexican chocolate, frothed by Dolores herself, with Dolores to look at as he ate and drank. Her beauty had an extra edge because she was frightened, and she was frightened because she had heard ugly rumors from the street. She followed him to the door, afterward, begging him not to go out through the curious crowd that gathered still in front of the silversmith's, looking at the broken door

But Liddell went out. All voice stopped when he appeared. Then murmurs began. They were pointing him out. They were saying that he was the man who had done it. A woman with a broad face and a red nose leaned out of a window and yelled: "He shot his partner in the back! He shot him in the back! Put the dogs on him! He shot him in the back!"

It was plain that the town of San Jacinto had been hearing plenty about Slip Liddell during the night.

When he walked into the sheriff's office, Chris Tolliver was running the tip of his tongue, with a painful slowness, over the crack in his lip. He looked at Liddell as though at a bodiless image of the night before.

"What about that five thousand?" asked Liddell.

"I've forwarded your claim and proofs," said the sheriff, shortly. "I sent it up to the attorney general. Maybe we'll be hearing in a couple of days."

He smiled all on one side of his mouth, as though in that way he would less endanger that splitting lower lip.

"It's funny, is it?" asked Liddell.

"Kind of," agreed the sheriff. He rubbed his bulging eyes, always tired, always reddened.

"A five-thousand-dollar joke, eh?" asked Liddell.

"Kind of," repeated Chris Tolliver.

The secretary pretended to be busy, but he had stopped typewriting and shuffled many papers softly together, searching for something which he obviously would not find.

"Tell me where the point is. I could use a good joke," observed Liddell.

"The point is—will you be here in San Jacinto when the money comes through?" asked Tolliver.

"Why not?" answered Liddell.

"I thought some of the boys already had paid a call on you this morning?"

"They found me in, too. What about it?"

"The next time they call, will you be there?"

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"There won't be a next time."

"Won't there?"

"No," said Liddell.

"Maybe not. Maybe I don't know my town," remarked Tolliver.

LIDDELL went back to the silversmith's. The air was full of noise like the Fourth of July. For the custom in San Jacinto during the fiesta season was to keep the day and the night alive. Hurdy gurdies pushed through the streets; mandolin players strolled and serenaded favored windows; snatches of band music always were growing and disappearing out of the distances; and the children of the town suddenly multiplied by ten and poured their chattering and yelling into every crevice of quiet.

In spite of himself, he did not wish to pass down that street in front of Pinelli's. He did not want that fat-faced woman to lean out of the window with her denunciation as she had done before. So he took another way home, though it meant climbing a wall. When he reached the courtyard he stepped into the stable. The mule stood there with dreaming eyes and a cruelly puckered mouth but Cicely was gone.

When he asked in the house, no one could tell what had happened. Armando rushed off upstairs to Dolores and that left Liddell for a moment alone in the shop with Juanita. She softened her voice to a half audible whisper.

She looked up at Liddell with the most friendly of smiles, so that if her husband returned down the inner hall he would observe only that expression on her face, but what she was saying was: "Why don't you go, Señor Jimmy? Why don't you go before you have the house pulled down over our heads? The whole town hates you. And Saint Mary of Gold knows that I've hated you these years!"

She was still smiling.

"It's good for your complexion to do a little hating," answered Liddell. "It takes ten years off that pretty face, Juanita."

Her smile stretched and froze in place; then both her husband and her daughter came with clattering feet and a double outcry down the stairs into the hall.

Liddell did not wait for them. He knew by the exclamations of dismay that they had no news of how the mare had gone, so he stepped out into the street and ran the gauntlet this time of silent eyes, which looked at him as at something monstrous.

He went neither north or south through the town with his inquiries because in those directions ran the river roads, where automobiles could overtake even the swiftest of horses. But he went east with inquiry first and then west; and it was near the western rim of the little town that he found a peddler leading a mule that carried two great hampers and the peddler had, in fact, seen just such a golden-bay mare ridden toward the hills by a ragged young lad.

He described the rider.

"Skeeter!" said Liddell softly to himself, and stood still, looking west toward the ragged sides of the range so ineptly named Monte Verde. No horse in San Jacinto could overtake that wise-footed Cicely with such a feather-weight as Skeeter on her back, and an automobile might as well try to run down a shark's throat as through those rocks.

He stood there for a moment with anger overtaking him from behind, as it were, until the weight of it turned his face crimson.

After a while he went down to the station, taking empty byways because he had no wish to be recognized again; but most of the people were away at the fair grounds and the streets were clear enough. He had been looking at his mental map of the country all the way, and he was quite clear as to what he would do. He found out at the station that no passenger train went east for some time but while he was still asking questions a long freight came around the bend like thunder out of the west. It came closer, the empties in the string rattling like snaredrums.

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LIDDELL walked away from the station platform until some stacked piles shut him away from the view of San Jacinto. The big engine passed him at that moment, struggling powerfully against the grade, and a moment later he spotted a brakeman, a big man with arms akimbo and a deep-visored cap.

To him Liddell signaled a high sign that every tramp and every brakeman understands. The answer was a favorable wave of the hand and Liddell decided on the next empty flat-car. The train was not doing more than thirty miles an hour. When he sprinted the procession of cars slowed up perceptibly. Then he turned and jumped for the steel ladder with arms and legs stretched out before him, as a cat jumps when it goes into a fight. Feet and hands struck their chosen rungs of the ladder. He swung violently back to the left, then clambered up the side and sat down at the end of the flat car.

The high sides kept him from seeing anything except the ridges of Monte Verde and the sun-faded blue of the sky with two or three buzzards adrift in the high light like a few ugly words on a blank page of white. Then the rattling of the flat car began to shake his wits into a thoughtless jumble for it was a rough bit of roadbed and the heavy flat car crashed and shook like a vast cargo of tin and iron junk. The vibration set the sky trembling.

It shivered the teeth of Liddell together and set a tingle in his lips and eyelids. No shadow of warning came over him, but he turned his head about suddenly and saw the big brakeman coming up behind him, still with the same smile. This fellow had a pair of small, watchful eyes that had no relation whatever to the smile on his lips. Liddell stood up and held out a dollar bill.

"Okay, chief?" he asked. "I'm dropping off a few miles up the line."

The brakeman took the bill, looked at it a moment, tucked it into a trouser pocket, and struck Liddell violently across the head with a leather-covered blackjack. The blow knocked him back against the end of the car. He teetered far over, out of balance. Part of his brain remained alive to tell him that if he fell the wheels that rushed behind the flat car would finish him; but his hands had no sense in them.

They would not grip the edge of the car and maintain a secure grip. The heavy jolting was helping to unbalance him. And then he saw the big brakeman coming at him again with the blackjack in the hollow of his hand, the knob of it just inside the tip of his fingers. Still only a small instinct in Liddell told him to fight. The rest of his mind was telling him that this was a dream and that the still smiling face of the brakeman was that of a friend.

The brakeman took his time. He set his feet wide apart. His smile broadened. Even the little eyes twinkled with pleasure, now. Then he slapped the blackjack at Liddell's head. He was so sure of himself that it was easy to duck the blow. Liddell spilled forward and threw his arms around the fellow's body.

It was like embracing a barrel sheathed with India rubber, the bones were so big, the muscles so hard. He took Liddell by the throat, pushed him off to arm's length and struck at his face with the blackjack.

THE car heeled at a curve. That was why he missed that stroke. Otherwise he should have smashed Liddell's face to a pulp. As it was, he not only missed but lost his grip and Liddell hit him twice about the head.

There was no force in the punches. His shoulders were soggy and his elbows were cork. The brakeman kept on smiling. Some of the deliberate surety had left him, however. He freshened his grip on the blackjack. He came in like a boxer, with short, shuffling steps, his long left hand out.

Liddell paid no heed to that. A man with a club strikes hard only with the club hand. Liddell watched the blackjack

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The life was coming back to him. The pain in his head was burning away the fog. The top of his skull seemed to be off. But he was glad of the torment. It was whisky to him.

It made him hot all over with strength. The wits came back into his feet; they made sense as they leaped to the side and let the brakeman's rush go by. Liddell buried his fist in the soft of the body. It went right in deep. It creased the brakeman like a piece of paper and doubled him over.

Liddell crouched. Only the shudder and jouncing of the car unsteadied his target. So he got in two lifting punches that straightened his man. The brakeman was back on his heels making a futile swipe through the air with the blackjack. A thin line of blood, like a stroke of red paint, appeared on his mouth.

Liddell hit for that mark. Then he stepped back and let the brakeman fall on his face. The blackjack, as though there were intelligent malice in it, flew out of the nerveless hand and rapped against Liddell's shin. He picked it up and threw it away; then he sat down to wait.

He was scarcely aware of the weariness in his body because the pain from his head was reaching down through him and touching all his nerves. Each rattling bounce of the car brought him taut with pain.

The head of the brakeman kept jouncing up and down. He had red hair, long and thin. The dust on the floor of the car blew into it and clogged with the blood. For he still was bleeding. A good pool of it gathered around his head. When he tried to sit up, his hand slipped in the blood. He fell on his face again. He lay there for another long moment, his body jouncing loosely. After a while he managed to sit up and his face was bad to see.

He covered it with his hands and sat there with his back bowed as though there were no spine in it.

Liddell squatted on the quivering car, leaning on one hand to steady himself, and stared at the man he had beaten. The brakeman was silent and slack, as if he were still unconscious.

He was very big. He must have weighed two hundred and twenty or thirty pounds and Liddell knew that he never had been beaten before. Now the manhood was gone out of him. This shack never would be able to bully a tramp again. Before long he would not be able to look any angry man in the face. It made Liddell sick to think of what was coming.

Still the fellow sat there with his hands over his face and the blood leaking out between his fingers and running down over his wrists.

But now the ridges of Monte Verde were diminishing rapidly in height; the country began to smooth out. Off to the left lay a flat land with a reddish-brown mist gathered low down over it. It made the throat of Liddell dry to look at it for he had spent time enough on the desert.

Now the wheels of the train began to rattle in an increasing staccato. They had passed the long grade, at last, and were heading down. He went over the side of the car, hung on the lowest rung of the ladder, and looked back to see if the brakeman were in sight; but the big man was still hidden from view.

The rough of the tiles beside the track now gave way to a broad, cinder-spread shoulder. Liddell swung back, slanted his body, and let go. He landed with hard-running feet. By the time he had come to a walk the caboose of the train was going by, with a dirty flag blowing and snapping off the rear of it.

NOW that he was on the ground, there was no wind whatever. The sun burned down through his hat. Two hot thumbs pressed against the top of his head as though there were no bone to shelter the brain itself. His right hand was painful, also. He had used it for the last, finishing punch and one of the brakeman's teeth, cutting straight through his lip, had driven into Liddell's middle finger

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just below the knuckle, cutting to the bone. It still bled. His whole hand was red.

For a hundred yards or so he followed the rails until he came to faintly traced path.

He thought, as he turned into the rough along the side of Monte Verde, that brakemen are a queer lot. Usually they are as tough as shoe leather but this fellow had been too big. All big men are soft, somewhere. They have some small dimension somewhere. Usually it's the neck. Big heads set on small necks are no good. Even he himself was too big. He was three inches too tall. Five feet ten is plenty. Condense a hundred and eighty pounds in five feet ten and you have plenty of man, rubbery with strength, compact, hard all over. If you're closer to the ground you don't have so far to fall. If you're closer to the ground you're not so apt to break your back when you lift.

He kept thinking of these things in a monotone of the mind, a dreary repetition, pacing out the words of his thinking with the steps he took; and the pain got worse and worse in his head.

He came to a little song of running water. It was a rill that went among the rocks quick as the flash of a fleeing snake. The water was no good for drinking. It was brackish with alkali. But it did pretty well for washing his hand and his head. There was not much of a lump on top of his head but the scalp was cut, and he was perfectly certain that the skull was fractured. At last he made himself take the full strength of his hands and work on each side of the pain. He had a feeling that if there were a fracture he would feel and even hear the bone edges rasp together. When he heard nothing, he felt much better. The sea-sickness left the pit of his belly when he stood up and marched ahead.

When you go west out of San Jacinto there is only one easy way of climbing Monte Verde. If you take the easy way, it leads you off into a shallow depression that deepens and narrows to a valley and at last the valley cuts down to a gorge which is not twenty feet wide in places. It is cut by water that only runs down that draw during the spring rains. In seasons of light rainfall there is no run of water at all.

The gorge has straight sides. The bottom of it is set with boulders as big as a horse and rider, and there are some shrubs growing, too, because the rain water never runs down the draw long enough to drown a plant. But it's a desolate gorge.

Up the mountain sides there is some smoky green of palo verde and cactus sticks out catclaws at you and the rocks are hand-polished by the sun so that they hurt your eyes at mid-day. This was where Liddell sat down on the shady side of the boulder to wait. . . .

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Help 15 Miles Of Kidney Tubes

To Flush out Acids and Other Poisonous Waste

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 Miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. Most people pass about 3 pints a day or about 3 pounds of waste.

Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning shows there may be something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

An excess of acids or poisons in your blood, when due to functional kidney disorders, may be the beginning of nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 Miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

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One Good Turn . . .

By ALFRED BATSON

Author of "The Strategist"

According to Chinese arithmetic, 1 cockeyed jockey + 1 cockeyed nag should = telephone numbers at the pay-off window

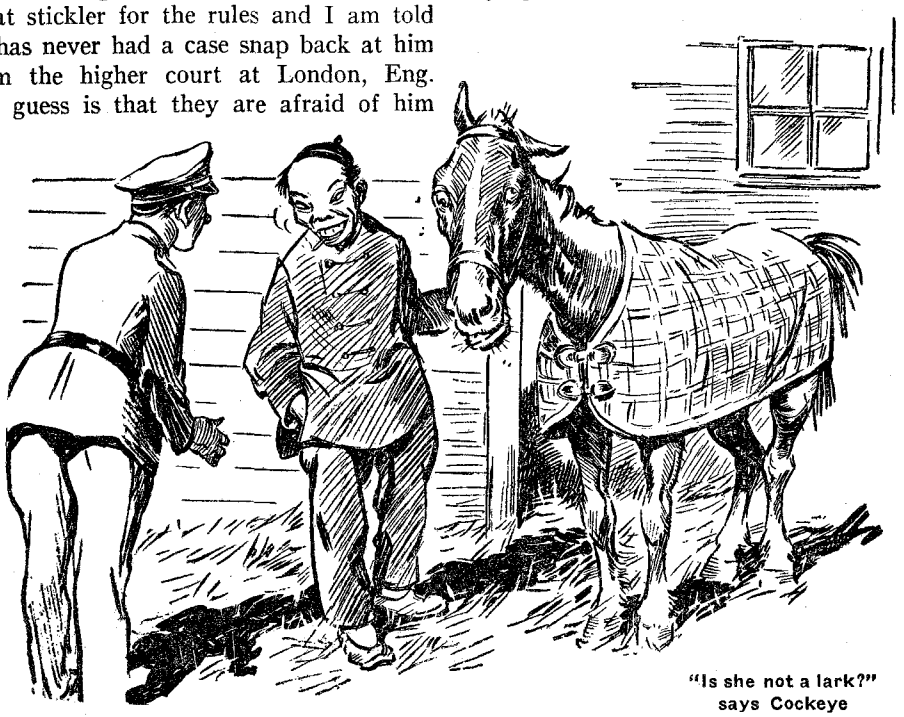
I AM sitting in His Brittanic Majesty's Court for China at Shanghai trying to catch up on lost shut-eye, for you would be surprised if you knew how little a marine can get in barracks on his day off. But I must do it on the q.t. because His Honor Judge Sir Angus MacIntosh Murdock has voiced himself plenty on dignity and today he is in session. And how he is in session!

His dizzy wig is stiffly upright on his head and his bathrobe fur covering must weigh fifty pounds, but there is no sign of weakening on his head pan. He is a great stickler for the rules and I am told he has never had a case snap back at him from the higher court at London, Eng. My guess is that they are afraid of him there as I would be even if I were the King which I am glad I am not. I have enough trouble keeping one uniform looking oke as things are.

The main bout comes up and as I listen I gather it is for theft, mayhem, arson, libel, about everything short of murder and all rolled into one. It is between a native, Kwok Kwok-tz, and one Charles George Ashburton-Cheltenham, whose flag you can guess.

Well, I give it the ear and am settling to grab my shut-eye wholesale when I see a weazened little Chinese going forward. I hold my breath and look again. Then I am wide awake pronto.

Who is he but our old pal Cockeye the Magician who always entertains at our smokers and loses the dough right after trying to remember that a full house



"Is she not a lark?" says Cockeye

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comes in second to fours. We have always been so busy watching his hands for fear he would forget himself that we have never learned his full monicker. And anyhow, had we ever tried to say it fast we might have been shot for a duck. In China anything can happen and usually does.

I snap into it at seeing Cockeye and I discover he is seconded by E. Fenton Parnlyprud-Plovington who is a stuffed shirt in any man's language and a double one in his own.

Then I wise up to a second surprising discovery.

Charles George Ashburton-Cheltenham is the full handle of that well known heel "Short Change Charley" who runs the worst gin mill west of Honolulu. "Genuine Scotch with a breath of the Heather" is his speciality but many guys in my outfit claim it is nothing but doped Yangtze River water and not even strained.

As the charges are spieled off I learn that my pal has gone in for pony racing and is proprietor of the Manchu Empress Stable which houses only one nag, Feng, and a filly at that. Short Change has the Buckingham Palace Stud which, despite its snooty sound, has been barred from every foreign track in the east and must run over native courses. But this is not told because we all know it, even His Honor Sir Ang who is a regular guy on his day off when he comes out from under that wig and can come by a ticket without charge. You must remember his nationality.

The row is about three bales of hay which little Cockeye claims he paid for but on delivery found not to be imported Washington State fodder but local marsh grass which no self-respecting nag would eat, not even his blue-blooded Feng.

Well, by the time I get it all straight in my mind the oath is drawing to a close and I hear," . . . so help you God."

"And how!" Cockeye snorts.

I see Plovington's maw drop open, and a frigid voice comes down from on high.

"Will the clark repeat the oath?"

The clark stutters and stammers and finally gets through with it and at the end we hear from the box: "You said it, baby."

WELL, a hush settles over the court like what happens when gobs arrive on the scene of action and finds us leathernecks have been there two weeks.

I shoot a look at Sir Ang and see him fixing my pal with a glare that would boil an iceberg. Plovington has so far forgotten court dignity that he tilts his silly wig back, but only for a second. Then he gets hep to his terrible manners and straightens it, though the tail and the dinky black bow are now over his left ear. What I'm getting at is that Cockeye has upset the works.

"Will the plaintiff kindly give his attention to the bench?" the acid voice comes again after a pause.

I gather then that Cockeye is in for a blistering lecture of the kind that has made Sir Ang feared from Singapore to Yoko and I am sorry for him. He should know better than to use slang in a limey court.

He grins in a friendly way but never moves his head and Sir Ang raps with his pencil. A dull red is creeping up the old boy's neck and his face reminds me of a steak tartar.

I catch on then for the first time. Poor Cockeye can't fasten his glims on the bench for the best of reasons—he is cockeyed! One of his black lamps is shifting over the ceiling and the other is covering us spectators, but his noggin is pointing dead on the bench.

I hope Sir Ang is going to call "no contest" but I am wrong. He is beginning to breathe heavy and he drops his pencil. He bends slowly down to pick it up but his head snaps back like it is on a spring, only Ben Turpin is not caught by the trick.

"Will the plaintiff kindly look at the bench?" Sir Ang tries again.

Cockeye says he is doing exactly that

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and we have to take his word for, after all, who can argue with a cockeyed guy about where he is looking. I am no lawyer but I know that much.

Plovington comes out of his trance and pushes the bow into place and the clark stops hopping about. His Honor calms down a bit and asks Cockeye to tell his part of the steal. So my pal begins, shaking a thumb at Short Change.

"That punk crook . . ." but he gets no farther.

Sir Ang is tapping and Plovington is about to collapse. Then after some nervous coughing we hear:

"The court feels it incumbent to remind the plaintiff that he is expected to converse in the English tongue."

"This bimbo . . ." Cockeye starts again, but Sir Ang cuts him off.

"What is this punk and bimbo, pray tell? Cannot the plaintiff speak pidgin English?"

Cockeye draws himself to his full five feet and heaves back scornfully, "Pidgin English are for coolie houseboy. I are the best damn magical in China and a lots better *mafoo*, yeah man."

He is getting his lingo mixed but the general idea is there and I have all I can do to hold back a cheer. I catch a look at Plovington then and he doesn't seem quite happy. Suddenly he takes off his silly wig, bows very low and tosses the bombshell:

"M'lud," he says, "I beg permission to withdraw from this case. I am in the unfortunate position of the bench in that the plaintiff's language is entirely beyond my comprehension."

Short Change breaks in then with a wise crack that there was no case in the first place and we hear from Cockeye:

"Bushwa, Short Change. Nuts to you."

THAT is, I gather that this was directed at Short Change but I notice that my pal's right lamp is glued on Sir Ang while his left is aiming straight at Plovington, so I am all balled up and so is everybody else. But I have no time to figure it out straight for Sir Ang is banging with a book.

"Nuts?" he growls, forgetting his dignity. "Who has mentioned nuts? This action concerns hay. And pray what is bushwa?"

It is then that I get to my feet and let fly as I come down the aisle.

"M'lud," I say, "the gent in the box has learned English by hanging out with the Ninth U. S. Marines and as I belong to that snappy outfit, always the first to fight, I beg of the learned his honor to let me act as interpreter. Nuts is cheap slang and means scram while bushwa means skip it or forget it and is always said to a dumbbell or a dope."

My friendly explanation about floors old frozen puss. His pan goes from dark red to a morning-after blue but he doesn't throw in the towel. "Perfectly incredible," he says instead. "Perfectly incredible."

"Fawncy. Oh, fawncy," Plovington pipes up from the sidelines.

It is just then that the clock strikes.

"Case adjourned until this time tomorrow," Sir Ang says with a smile that looks like relief.

"Fake! Fake! I are robbed. It's racket . . ." Cockeye shouts. "Tomorrow is out because I are run my nifty filly in the *mafoo* canter."

Old Sir Ang hesitates and scratches his chin and I see he is thawing suddenly.

"Ah yes," he pipes sweetly. "The *mafoo* race. Will next week at this time be all right, Mr.—?" He fumbles with his papers before he says, "Mr. Kwok Kwok."

"You're damn tootin'," Cockeye agrees.

Believe it or not, but this gets no rise out of Sir Ang. His smile chills and I am wondering what is on his mind when Short Change pipes up:

"My dear fellow, you don't mean you are running that thing of yours in the *mafoo* race?"

"I are running her a length in advancement of your goat at the finish," Cockeye says, winding up with a loud bird.

Short Change throws back his head. "Haw haw. Oh, I say, raw-ther. What a

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sense of humor." Then he scowls suddenly. "I am entering Lightning to give Speedy Wong some pocket money. Think it over."

Well, that is a fine fix. Lightning is the record holder at the distance and Speedy Wong is the best jock in Shanghai and Short Change's *mafoo* to boot. The whole thing makes me glum because I do not like to see little Cockeye's filly get off to a sure beating the first time she is mentioned to me, so I say: "Cockeye, can this baby of yours move?"

"I am never before on race in her," he snaps back. "But one good turn deserve his brother. See I at the track and I show you some candy from a baby, hot damn."

That is enough for me. I know Cockeye is nobody's dope and I am wondering how much I can raise for the killing, when we hear Sir Ang.

"Ah, Mr. Kwok Kwok," he says in a friendly manner, "the *mafoo* race. The *mafoo* race indeed." And he smiles and purrs like he is talking to the King.

Now I get hep to what is in the wind so I chime in my piece.

"M'lud," I say, "Mr. Kwok Kwok would consider it a great honor if you would come to the race as a owner's guest."

Before I can go on Cockeye has caught on and dumped two Annie Oakleys in Sir Ang's paw, which somehow was out and open.

Well, that is that, but I have a hunch as we leave that the hay case will not be decided in the court but on the Hunjao track and I am going to be there believe me to collect that candy from the baby.

NOW a *mafoo* is a native trainer or a trainer-owner and every foreigner who races has one to handle his string. On the closing day of each card there is a special race for the *mafoos*, sort of a consolation. The purse goes to them and not to the owner but the smart foreigners get around that by letting them ride the worst plug in the stable, so if it is killed the loss is not great.

Decent horse feed is hard to get in Shanghai so foreign style horses are out and the tracks are run over by sawed off runts known as Mongolian ponies. They are screwy to watch if you are used to Belmont or Tropical because sometimes the jocks get aboard by standing up with legs extended and the pony walks under from behind. Others back in from the front but not many this way as they are very dumb beasts.

I get to the track early and see from the program that while the other races carry three to eight entries, the *mafoo* canter has 39 of these things entered. Also I see something else.

Short Change is strutting around with a bunch of on-the-nose ducats in each hand! Then I look at the board and see that his sweet little runner has been backed down in a heavy play from $8.40 to an even three bucks, which shows what the crowd thinks.

Then I lamp Feng and my breath catches when I see she is held in such high esteem that only one ticket has been bought on her and the price is $13,280—so I hold my dough. I like long shots as well as the next player but I have a dirty suspicion that this Feng is too long.

I am strolling away when I run into Sir Ang. He gives me an icy glare which I cap with a pally, "Howdy, Judge." This makes his cheeks go white and his mouth drop open. I gather that he is shy off the bench and am about to suggest a beer when he is joined by Sir Wraxham Portengill-Bayswater who is the limey admiral and a very big gun indeed.

So I go up in the stand to get a line on the crowd and I have never seen such a mob in any two days racing combined. Every foreigner in China is there and about 90,000 Chinese, and it is all because of the *mafoo's* race and I cannot blame them. This is my second attendance but after the first I was laid up three days with sore jaws from laughing and I remember reading about one guy who broke three ribs from the same reason. Ask any marine who has seen a *mafoo* race, if you don't believe me.

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Well, Cockeye shows up and asks if I have any dough. I say "yes." I have borrowed eight bucks.

"Bet on my nifty filly Feng," he chirps. "I am sure to win above her. But do not too much bet," he adds quick.

"And why?" I ask, to kid him.

"Because her price I must keep high if the candy are sweet to be."

"Ah," I say, "you will have no trouble because only one guy has gone down on her so far."

"One guy!" he yelps, scowling like he has been robbed. "When looking at her price I am last it are the beautiful twen'y four thousan' six hun'ned." Then he rolls his lamps like they are on hinges. "I will let you the one ticket bet but for more I will be in pain."

You can't blame a guy for wanting all he can get but just the same this thing looks so screwy that I say, "Before I bet I would like to look-see this Feng."

THAT is jake with him and we go down to the last stall in the line. The door is open and I am looking in without seeing anything but a pile of hay. I rub my eyes and look again but no go.

"Hot damn," says Cockeye. "Is her not a lark?"

Try as I will I cannot bring this lark within range so I say, "She is not with us. She has been snitched."

"Nuts," he says. "See." He points and I look but I see nothing.

Then he loses his temper and kicks something. There is a movement and up struggles what must be Feng and she has hard trouble doing that.

Well, I have seen lots of horseflesh in my time but I have never come on anything to compare with the collection of bones that is the sweet baby of the Manchu Empress Stable. She looks more like my sister's six-year-old fur-coat, moth spots and all.

She stands there wobbling on what must be four legs and from the time it takes her to move her head from one side to the other I know there is some water buffalo in her past and from the ruff above her neck, her hind legs shorter than her fore and more defects than I can mention I know there is also some hyena. I expect her to fall down dead any second from exhaustion in standing up and I know she will howl herself to death from laughing if she ever gets in front of a mirror.

Then she moves her maw around and I am almost struck dumb. No wonder.

She is cockeyed!

She is so cockeyed that where her owner's glims at least are on an even plane, her left goes up and her right down. It is the goofiest pair of eyes I ever met.

"Sweet patootie," Cockeye pipes up. "I knowed you would her like."

I say nothing but wish Cockeye luck and walk out. A lot of yelling is coming from the stand and I am taking a short cut for there along the back of the stalls when I hear a voice that pulls me up short.

I edge along to a hole in the boarding, look in and see Speedy Wong and Short Change gathered around a swell-looking piece of horseflesh that is Lightning. Short Change is fumbling with a squirt gun.

He jams it in and his pony leaps near to the ceiling. Then he goes to the other side and repeats the dose again and when Lightning reaches Terra Firma this time there is a wild look in his eyes that tells me he will not pull up until he reaches Pasadena, Calif., and then only for second wind.

"You watch this Kwok Kwok coolie," Short Change says. "I would rather lose to any other blighter than to him."

Well, I have heard enough and seen enough to put all my dough on Lightning on the nose and I am heading back to tip off Cockeye when I decide to sneak a look first and see if he is not kidding me with that ant eater of his. He may have a ringer up his sleeve. But no, I look through a crack and he is getting into his riding togs. His colors are Irish green and I am somewhat miffed for I do not like to see the Irish go down to a beating behind a Chinaman riding a Mongolian pony.

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Then he begins saddling her and as he does this he carefully closes the stall door. After that he picks up a very large chestnut burr and inserts it gently under her tail.

"We must from this cheap crooks win," he says to her. She only yawns in reply.

The thought comes to me then that what I have seen is being duplicated probably in every other stall on the place for a *mafoo* would rather win this one race of the year than to have a Rolls Royce with an American driver and a limey to open the door and that is every Chinaman's great desire in life.

I REALIZE that even for two bucks I can't lose much, for if Feng should win it would be an awful price, and I get a vision of Cockeye and his baby both having goofy eyes and that decides me. Well, I am a hunch player so I ankle in and lay down my two ducats and the board rings up the second ticket. The price now is somewhere around $9,000. That scares me so much I ask for my dough back but the cashier says "no can."

Well, I am turning away from there when along comes my pal. He is in a great hurry and I gather that he does not like to leave his nag alone though I cannot figure what he fears, unless it is the glue-factory buyer. He looks around suspiciously then dashes in and buys a ticket on Feng.

That bucks me up so instead of getting another for myself which would knock down the odds, I go to the telephone and call up a limey who makes book at the club on Bubbling Well Road across from the Y. He works in a bank and I know that if he is not good himself for a beating he will borrow from the bank till because the Limeys hate a welcher and have a high sense of honor. He says he will pay mutuel odds on any mule that starts and I say I want four pieces on this Feng. He has never heard of her and when I mention Manchu Empress Stable he has never heard of that either so I get mad and raise the four to eight.

It is all oke with him, though he says why don't I light a cigar with my dough if I like to throw it away.

Then I remember a gob on the U. S. flagship who has a roll us marines are itching to get into so I call him and he says why don't I get the whole corps of gyrenes to go down because he likes our dough, it is so easy to come by. But he takes me on the cuff for six bucks.

Well, I get out of the booth and am standing in a sweat when who shows up but a guy who makes my dukes clear for action. He is all dolled up and is heading for Feng's window in the betting ring when I hail him.

"You would not be so foolish as to bet on this turtle, would you, Mr. Darnely-prud-Plovington?" I say.

He looks at me kind of funny and pipes: "Really, chappie, I say. That is . . ." but I cut him off right there.

"Here's something that is a great secret," I whisper to him. "This filly Feng has just laid an egg and is a sick monkey."

"Egg," he says, as his jaws drop open, "egg? Monkey? Really, my man, I thought this was a pony race. Egg? Most extraordinary! Dear me . . ."

I cut him off by shaking a thumb at Lightning's window and I whisper again. "On the nose, guy, on the nose. Where is your patriotism, betting on a Chink nag? I am ashamed of you. Lay it on the Buckingham Palace Stud . . ."

He looks at me a moment and he looks at my dukes and then he takes my suggestion.

Then a bell sounds and they come out into the ring and we hear the howl of the spectators when Feng and Cockeye come into range. The others are not so bad.

Lightning is bouncing around and I move the Pasadena, Calif., down to Patagonia and she will win at 16 lengths and going away at that. A crowd of Chinese stewards begin frisking the jocks for hidden whips and spurs but when they come to Cockeye they are so excited over the discovery that his glims aren't mates and

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neither are those of his pigs, that they forget about looking for such as a chestnut burr. Then they parade out and I scram for the stand.

IT TAKES almost an hour to get the 39 entries lined up and when they are set they are three deep but Feng is in the front row.

The gun goes off and they break nicely. I am watching close through the dust but I fail to notice any Irish green at the first post so I look back and there is this Feng right at the starting line, biting her flank while Cockeye is kicking her until his heels must be sore. It is a very sad picture, believe me, and I am about to give up when she comes around after a big yawn and starts loping like she is looking for a shady place for a sleep.

Suddenly I see Cockeye's hand move toward her rump and she shoots out like she has been shot from a gun. She is what you might call a close last at the half way mark and Lightning is a far lead, but Cockeye does not give up. He is slamming her rump, kicking and cracking her in the jaw with his knees and the three motions keep her moving, but that is about all.

Then I get a great surprise that bucks me up. One of the plugs has stopped cold to munch grass inside the rail and I know this Feng will be saved the disgrace of coming in last. I know also that I am down more than I can save in months.

They go along like that for a couple of poles and then they turn into the stretch and I see that Speedy Wong is holding Lightning in, but that when he lets go she will win by 19 lengths in two jumps.

I am reaching for my cap and thinking of a cool beer to help me forget when a very strange thing happens. The whole Chinese grandstand busts through the fence and swarms out on the track and it is a fine mess and no question. They all have their hands behind their backs or hidden in their long-gowns and then after a moment everybody begins heaving. Shoes, mudballs, sticks, rocks, anything that can be heaved is in that barrage.

The idea is that everybody has a favorite and is blasting away to hold the others back and let his baby through. I am sure this is the end of Feng until I recall that she has no friends and neither has she any enemies. Those Chinese are yelling murder and the foreigners in the stand are laughing themselves sick and no wonder. The whole thing is so crazy I am beginning to laugh myself.

I shift my glasses to the pack and what do I catch but Cockeye slowing up, though he is beating Feng's rump for all he is worth. Well, my guess is that the points have worn off that chestnut burr. But he is trying, you can't say he isn't. His feet are out of the stirrups and he is helping her along every way he can, but still he will come in a bad 38 in the field of 39. Then I see a silk topper down there in all those Chinese but I cannot see the puss under it because of the dust.

My attention goes to Lightning for Speedy Wong has let her out and she can win in a walk, when abruptly someone cracks her on the nose with a paper bag full of water and she hesitates and the others go past her like the Light Brigade.

She is in the middle now when I lamp that silk topper again and who is it but that wet smack Darnlyprud-Plovington who evidently is thinking of his dough and not of the "face" he is losing by being down there with those Chinese. He is tight in against the rail and he is holding up a piece of what looks like iron pipe in one hand and he has a looking glass in the other and with this he is trying to catch Feng's eyes and ball her up. But who can shine a mirror on a cockeyed pony's lamps?

Speedy Wong sees the pipe and reaches for it but in that split second the blast of sunlight nails Lightning in the face and she swerves. Who grabs that iron pipe as he goes but my pal of the hay case. With the same motion he brings it down on Feng's rump and she collects herself long enough to shoot into the lead—and my heart almost does a full stop in double time. Cockeye's glims are turned straight

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up into the sky and a big smile wreathes his pan and Feng's peeps are gone out of sight altogether back into her noggin. But still she is ahead and Cockeye is banging her like he is playing a bass drum in a Chink band.

WELL, it is all over in a Garrison finish. Cockeye slips her through on the inside. There is a split second when Lightning collects herself again and makes a bid but the nifty filly of the Manchu Empress Stable takes it by a nose-hair. I sit up then and begin to wipe some of the sweat off me and I am also fumbling for my mutuel ticket when I hear a wild yell up the track.

The mob is tearing after Cockeye to protest about his chunk of pipe, though I have seen a dozen other jocks with clubs and one had a piece of hose. But I know Cockeye is too smart to have the pipe on him and sure enough, the crowd leaves him after a quick search and heads back toward the finish where they all start searching.

I see Cockeye jump off Feng and head on a run for the pay-off window and that is enough for me—I do not have to be hit with a club to come to my senses.

Just as I reach the pay-off window Cockeye comes staggering in behind a smile from here to Yoko. He slams down his ducat and I slam down mine but the guy behind the bars says "no can." He has to wait to see if there is any protest.

"Do you think I are crooks?" Cockeye heaves at him. "I am insult never so before."

It is no time for words because if the gang gets in we are sunk and I am again in a heat when who shows up but His Honor Sir Ang, Plovington, Admiral Sir Wraxham Pettingill-Bayswater, the Shanghai foreign chief of police and a bunch of other big shot limeys.

Cockeye sighs and his grin returns but I am still at sea about it all when Sir Ang come out with a ticket and the cashier hesitates. I am worried because this must be the first ticket sold and I have never known Sir Ang to buy anything, but it is at this precise moment when Short Change comes charging in yelling for an investigation.

The chief of police locks the door to keep the crowd out and Sir Ang looks very severe at the cashier who is now scared bad. All the limeys are crowding together near him and he begins to pass out more dough than I ever thought existed when he sees the chief of police fumbling with some handcuffs.

"The price she pay to wins," he says, and it is sweet music to my ears, "are six t'ousan' four hun'nerd an' twen'y."

Short Change lets off a couple of sour notes when he hears that but Sir Ang freezes him with this:

"May I as a fellow Briton, sir, remind you that your protest is poor sportsmanship. Have you no sense of honor or fair play?"

Now all the time he is saying this he is stuffing his pockets fast with dough and you cannot hold it against him for you must remember his nationality. Then I slap down my pasteboard and the cashier begins telling off.

Believe me, friends, that is the high spot of my life to date—but I am still young.

WELL, I am getting my hooks around this stuff on the double because there is a very lousy feeling in the air, when suddenly little Cockeye comes up with his ducat.

Short Change looks over his shoulder and sees it is number Three and he asks me the number of mine and I say Two. Then he fixes his glims on Sir Ang.

"You had One," he almost screams. "That's the one I bought!"

"Are you insinuating, sir," the chief of police puts in his oar, "that His Honor is a thief?"

"No," Short Change splutters, "no. But—"

He is cut off by His Honor himself who quiets his heaving bay window and fixes his topper at a very daring angle on his dome. He looks Short Change in the eye

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and pipes very correct and dignified: "I may say to you, sir, nuts! Nuts indeed, sir. And it might add bushwa. Mr. Kwok Kwok presented me with this ticket."

Then he turns away like he is the King in person.

Now all this time little Cockeye is fumbling with the lock on the rear door. His face is brick red and he is in a great dither, but he slows up long enough to throw back at Short Change:

"Sir, His Honor Angus and the U. S. Marines are pals of mine in hay case. One good turns deserves some brother."

"You—! You—!" Short Change gasps, frowns heavy and I remember suddenly that Cockeye is the best damn magical in Shanghai as he has said, but I button my lip for good reason.

The chief of police has opened the door by this time and Sir Ang and his gang are taking it on the lam and I am wondering if I must hang a poke on Short Change to leave this fire-trap myself. Then a light seems to dawn, as the writers say, on Mr. Charles George Asburton - Cheltenham, Esq. He has made a $2 hedge bet on a screwball tip and he has been screwballed out of even that.

"That Cockeye came to talk to me in the paddock," he pipes. "I was watching the track and I thought he was also because his eyes were turned that way. But now I am beginning to suspect . . ."

Well, I like to be polite but I did not wait to hear more because I guessed what was to follow. I went through the door on the jump and found a taxi to take me back to the Settlement where I had a very important date with two guys who would not be very happy to see me. The taxi was already rolling when I hopped aboard.

Now in the taxi was Cockeye and the first thing he says is, "My sweet baby will race again never, hot damn. One man filly I will find and then breed her I cannot escape. But he must eyes have that in trouble are because it am a wonderful combination, yeah, man."

I do not argue with him on this because I am counting that dough and I agree quick that a cockeyed jock and a cockeyed pony is a hunch no real lover of horseflesh like myself could ever pass up. I am only hoping that he will find this "man filly" as he calls it. You would hope so too if you had been present at the shindig the Ninth U. S. Marines put on that night after the limey bank and the U. S. flagship paid off.

Coming Soon

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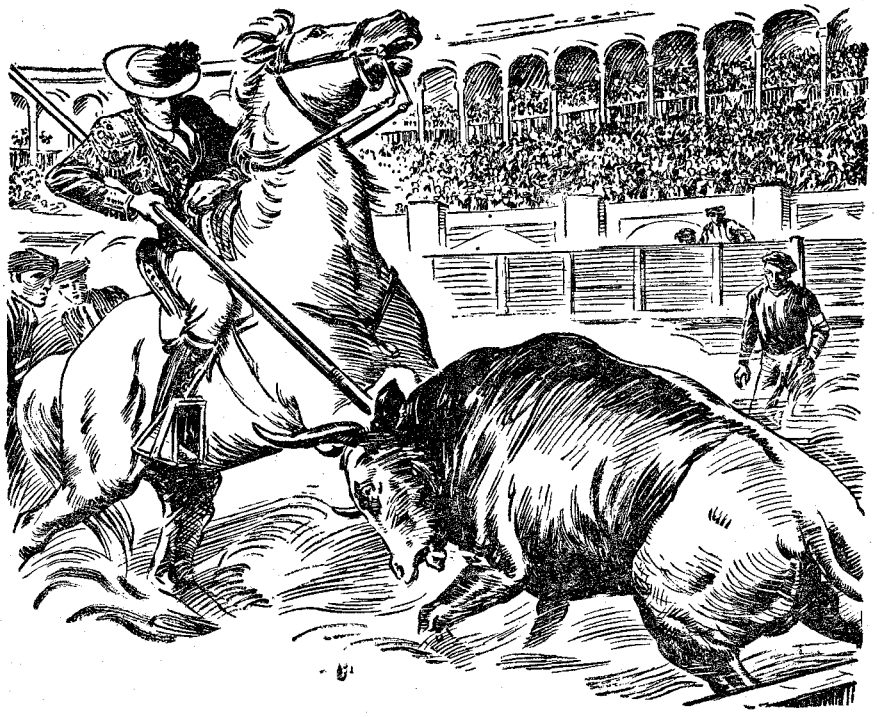

Picador

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "Dark Island," "Highland Man," etc.

Hola! Red is the afternoon . . . the silken capes are swirling and horse and man must be swift before onrushing horns . . .

I

THE man called El Gallo, the one with the scar down his jaw, was a bull fighter. He was very quick with his hands. He rolled the dice and picked up the money all in one motion. *"Que tal?"* he asked Joe Hood. "You want to bet that white horse?"

Fatigue and the cheap brandy had tightened a dark wall of pain inside Joe Hood's brain. It would take another roll, he thought dully, before he could be sure the dice were crooked. "No," he said, and smiled. "The horse is my ticket to Texas. But hit ten *colones*." He sat motionless when the money was out, watching El Gallo's hands.

They were powerful and broad, clamped easily over the dice. The right brushed against the left wrist in lifting, Joe Hood noticed. That was where the other pair was, in the left cuff. *"Olé!"* El Gallo said and sent the dice clacking over the table. "Six," he read, "and ace. You want any more, *Yanqui*."

Joe Hood was rising from the table. He measured El Gallo and the two other men seated there. The small, dark-faced fellow was a member of El Gallo's ring outfit, and cold sober. The third, slim, haggard and quite drunk, he had never seen before.

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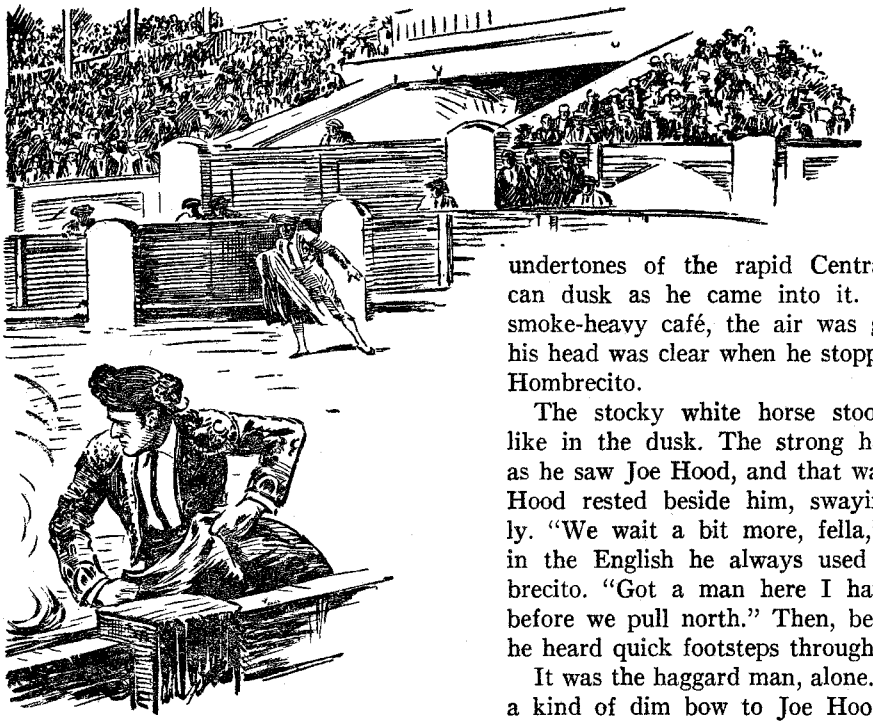

"Thanks," Joe Hood said. "That cleans me."

"Sit down again," the haggard man said. He fumbled the pile of money in front of him. "Have a drink. Watch me take him. Never yet saw a bull fighter who was a real gambler."

It was the fatigue that let the raw edge of Joe Hood's anger rip through his usual calm. "You're right," he said. "He's no real gambler. . . ." Then, swiftly, he reached for El Gallo's hands.

The bull fighter pulled backward fast, but the dice shook down from his sleeve, skidded beside the pair on the table. Joe Hood laughed. He called El Gallo the foulest name in his border Spanish collection. "You must be better with the bulls," he said. "As a crook, you stink."

The sound of El Gallo's breathing was slow, sharp. "Out," he said, almost quietly. "Before I have them throw you."

"Sure," Joe Hood said. "But I'll wait, outside."

The street was filled with the violet undertones of the rapid Central American dusk as he came into it. After the smoke-heavy café, the air was good, and his head was clear when he stopped before Hombrecito.

The stocky white horse stood statue-like in the dusk. The strong head lifted as he saw Joe Hood, and that was all. Joe Hood rested beside him, swaying slightly. "We wait a bit more, fella," he said in the English he always used to Hombrecito. "Got a man here I have to see before we pull north." Then, behind him, he heard quick footsteps through the dust.

It was the haggard man, alone. He made a kind of dim bow to Joe Hood. "Allow me," he said. "I am Ramon de Montemar y Delvayes."

"Joe Hood," Joe Hood said. "Did he take you, too?"

"No," Delvayes said. "You finished the game. But you're a fool to wait for a man like El Gallo."

"I was a fool," Joe Hood said, "to gamble. When I declared myself I proved it. A sock at his jaw for my money is fair enough, though. He picked up three hundred *colones* from me." He glanced away then at the town, peaceful and quite lovely in the dusk. It was like almost all the Latin-American towns he had seen in the years since he had left Texas, he thought.

There was a surface quiet and drowsy slowness about it, but underneath was a savage cruelty that struck fast when aroused. La Cruz, they called it, he remembered. The name came from the huge white cross the old soldier priests of the Conquest had built up there on the slope of the squat, fierce volcano beyond. A cross, to propitiate the volcano the ancient Indian peoples had worshipped as a god.

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Narrow stone streets and narrow stone houses, a couple of churches, a jail, a sprawling bull ring, and a few rotten cafés like the one behind. And no work for him and Hombrecito. The best he'd been able to do here was throw away the last of his money to a second-rate bull fighter who'd be out in a minute now to knife him. He laughed at that, and the man who had named himself Ramon Delvayes stirred nervously.

"Let me buy you a drink," Delvayes said. "The German over on the plaza has got some real Pilsener—"

"Forget it," Hood said. "Get going."

EL GALLO was coming out of the café. The dark-faced little man came with him. They walked easily, with a peculiar, sliding stride. As though they were working in on a winded and pain-stupid bull in the ring, Hood thought. He stepped forward, free from Hombrecito and Delvayes. "All right, *ladrones,*" he called.

There had been other people in the street before, Indian women with *rebozos* pulled tight about their heads, town youths in flashy suits and cheap patent leather shoes, and a couple of soldiers. Now they were gone. A military band clattered and blared in the plaza. The notes closed in around Joe Hood's words, blurred them. He laughed again, recalling that it was the first time he had fought to music.

His strides took the music's beat. He murmured the tune. He was all through caring, he knew. The guy who got Hombrecito got a good horse, and that was the end of it. . . .

El Gallo had a knife, a big knife. El Gallo's tawdry honor as a bull fighter and a split-tail gentleman had been called lousy, and now he was going to kill. The little, dark man had a knife, too, but not as big as the one his boss carried. He was only here to make sure the boss didn't get hurt. It was El Gallo who'd make the kill.

Joe Hood was trembling, the way he always trembled just before he hit. Then that passed, and he was steady. He gauged El Gallo's jaw the up-licking swing of the knife. He struck straight, in over the knife, but his body arched, slanting back and away.

The smack, he thought, was like a two-bit bat against a dime store baseball that had been left out all night in the rain. But El Gallo's hat jerked right off his bay-rummed hair. His eyes fluttered and his teeth met. He'd never been hit like that in his life, Joe Hood thought. El Gallo hadn't realized what it was to take a white man's punch under the jaw. He wheeled, coming in, and gave El Gallo a left.

He felt the knife then, along the forearm and wrist. The pain was an instant, flaring shock through those nerves to his brain. He had no more caution; he hit El Gallo with both hands.

The bull fighter went down on his shoulders like a man tripping off a plank. His arms slapped the dust and the knife flung loose. *"Adios, muchacho,"* Hood muttered, and swung to kick in his brains.

The dark-faced man rushed him from the side. There was no time for Hood to guard himself. All he could do was sprawl down beside El Gallo and try to roll clear. The dust of the street was in his eyes; he was half-blinded when he saw Delvayes.

Delvayes staggered the dark-faced man with a clumsy fist blow from behind. He closed in and grasped at the man's wrists. Hood saw that, and saw the knife strike up towards Delvayes' groin. From his knees, screaming, Hood rose at the dark-faced man.

The knife cut his hand terribly. Then he had it. He drove it in and the blade splintered against the chest bone.

The dark-faced man teetered around. He seemed to be doing a sort of exceptional dance. It was as if he led the music playing in the plaza. But he tripped and did not regain balance. His head lowered and blood gouted from him as he rolled down dead.

"So," Joe Hood whispered. "Like that . . . " He was dazed, sick and stupid. He was still unable to move. But he could

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remember Delvayes, what Delvayes had done for him. He straightened, made his voice articulate. "You're not the man, *primo,* to call me for a fool. Take the horse. Get smart, and out of here."

Delvayes was a yard away. He shrugged, then smiled. "We are together in stupidity," he said. "El Gallo has gone to the plaza for the police. Be quiet. If either of us runs or moves now, we'll be killed."

"Right," Joe Hood said. "But you're getting more than your share."

THE jail was one of the oldest buildings in the town. It reeked in every stone. But after El Gallo had gone, the jailers treated Delvayes with some respect. They put him and Joe Hood in one of the bigger, airier cells, then took the money he gave them and came back with brandy and cigarettes.

"Pretty good," Joe Hood muttered in the fever of his pain, "for a pair of boys in for a murder charge."

Delvayes pulled a cork, lifted the bottle. "Have a drink. Don't worry too much about that or anything."

"Listen," Joe Hood said, his voice rough. "I'm a Texan, a North American. I know what happens to a foreigner when they get him in one of these jails. They—" he took the bottle, drank deep—"won't be long with me. I'm a broken horse-wrangler, and now they've got my horse."

"Drink again," Delvayes suggested. "You have a splendid horse, and you'll have him back tomorrow. This is my country. Maybe I'm the town drunk, but my people count. My uncle, Don Ferrer Pietro, will be here in the morning. He always gets me out. This time he'll take you. After all, that was his money I was gambling with El Gallo. You saved him that, and saved my life."

He spread his hands.

"Carrai!" Joe Hood grunted. "You were trying to save mine. Here." He handed back the bottle. "Amuse yourself. I'm going to sleep. . . ."

Don Ferrer Pietro was an elderly, fat and lame man. He stood outside the cell bars in the morning sunlight and cursed Delvayes with a genial abandon. "So," he finished, "you spill blood with your brandy. And mix a *Yanqui* in the mess."

Delvayes blinked soberly. "He's the right kind of *Yanqui,*" he said. "He showed up El Gallo as a cheap crook."

"Any man," Don Ferrer snapped, "who ever saw El Gallo fight in the ring knows he's a cheap crook. He even fakes his cape work."

Delvayes moved close to the bars. "When you came in," he asked his uncle, "did you see this man's horse in the courtyard? Last night, El Gallo wanted him to bet it—against crooked dice."

A kind of expostulatory sighing noise came from Don Ferrer. He looked fully at Joe Hood for the first time. "You own the white horse?"

"Si, señor," Joe Hood said slowly.

"Why?"

Joe Hood could grin at the hard, critical light in the old man's eyes. "I'm a horse wrangler. I use him in my trade. And I don't get foolish often when I gamble."

"He's the best horse," Don Ferrer said, not speaking to anyone but himself, "from here to Mexico."

"From here to Texas," Joe Hood corrected. But Don Ferrer had gone, stamping down the corridor and yelling for the jailer.

"Now we go," Delvayes said. "You fixed it. My uncle is a lad who loves a fine horse or bull."

Joe Hood shook his head. "No sale," he said, "on Hombrecito."

"Quiet," Delvayes told him. "He doesn't want to buy your horse. But he doesn't want the jailer or El Gallo to get him."

Don Ferrer returned with the pot-bellied jailer. He kept silent as the cell was opened and until he and Delvayes and Joe Hood stood on the courtyard steps. "I own a place up on the *cordillera,*" he said then to Joe Hood. "I raise blooded

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stock and fighting bulls. Will you work for me with that white horse?"

Joe Hood was staring at Hombrecito across the courtyard. The men who had brought him here last night had picketed him short. Hombrecito trembled, his slim hocks strained within the cruelly knotted ropes, but he hadn't kicked out, tried to get away. Hombrecito had been waiting, Joe Hood understood, as he'd learned to wait many times before.

"I don't know," Joe Hood said. "I'm not sure." Moisture filled the corners of his eyes. He wanted to laugh, call out so Hombrecito could be aware they were free again. It was Hombrecito that counted now, he thought, not himself. It was Hombrecito who had got him out of jail.

"The business here," Don Ferrer said, "has been arranged. The authorities are content to call it a case of self defense."

"After you'd talked to them," Joe Hood said. "And put up a pile of money to make El Gallo close his head."

"Now," Don Ferrer said, "you're thinking about yourself, not your horse."

"He's a special sort of horse," Joe Hood said, the blood bright in his face. "He's not the kind for regular rancho work."

Don Ferrer made a gesture with both hands. "My place is called Canedon Mimosa. Maybe you've heard of it. Anyhow, I breed nothing but the finest stock there. I think your horse would not be wasted."

Joe Hood laughed then. "You mean," he said, "it's too bad I go along with Hombrecito. You'd like him, but you don't care much for me."

"No," Don Ferrer said. He openly studied Joe Hood's long, strong face and steady eyes. "We can use you, too."

"Come on," Ramon Delvayes said. "You'll find Canedon Mimosa very fine. It's where we all belong."

II

JOE HOOD'S impression of Canedon Mimosa never changed. It was always for him the loveliest place he had ever seen. Coming into it with Don Ferrer and Ramon Delvayes from the high *cordillera* trail, from the sunlight that beat off the mountain rocks against his eyes like barbs, he thought he had entered a dream.

The valley widened from a narrow gorge whose walls were stark rock. Then all the colors were cool, exquisite. Mimosa grew here in great profusion, tree after flowering tree. They made the light through which he and the others rode a soft golden glory. Coffee trees clustered along the way, the scent of the berries keen in the air. Water from a stream whose passage was silver and musical ran in the mimosa shadow. It was stinging cold, and Hombrecito waded out hock-deep, neighed with his head held high after he drank.

Delvayes grinned, turning his own mount. "Julia will hear that at the house," he said. "She'll be out to meet us."

The house rested where the mimosa banked against cypresses and huge pines sweeping up to the valley rim. The men who had built it had come from Spain in the Conquest. The tawny rubble walls were as thick as those of a fort, the windows recessed, the roof low and made of heavy reddish tile. But the main doorway was wide, had the flared lines of ancient Castillian grace, and the columns were things of absolute, simple beauty. Set there beyond the mimosa, against the cypresses and massed pines, it was in Joe Hood's eyes a perfection of all his nostalgic memories of the old houses of the Texas border country, and of all his dreams.

He slowed Hombrecito with a touch of the fingers upon the dust-clogged mane, fell back behind Don Ferrer when he saw the girl. She was advancing from the house along a flower-patterned path. She was more beautiful than the house, Joe Hood thought, and remembered he still wore a hat. He took it off, sat straight.

"My niece, Dona Julia Delvayes," Don Ferrer said. "Julia, this is Señor Hood, a friend Ramon has made in the town."

The dark gray depths of her eyes had given the only color in her oval-shaped face. Now as she studied Hombrecito her

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eyes and face warmed. She gravely and silently nodded to Joe Hood, and turned to Ramon. "I was a bit worried," she said. "Malinche heard a story that you were in trouble in town."

Ramon Delvayes grimaced. "Malinche should keep out of cheap bars," he said. "The gossip he gets isn't any good."

"Pues," Don Ferrer said, "Malinche is back. I want to have him meet Señor Hood and see his horse."

They met Malinche by the side of the house near the long line of stable buildings. He was a small and square man with quiet hands and eyes. Joe Hood recognized the type at once. He had come across men like Malinche countless times, and always they were *mayorals,* superb masters of horses and bulls. He got down from Hombrecito to take Malinche's hand. *"Buen'dias,"* Malinche said, and stared at the white horse.

It was Joe Hood's idea that he and Hombrecito stood at sudden, severe inspection here. But he had already been passed or rejected. Malinche was concentrating his scrutiny on Hombrecito. Malinche walked slowly around the horse while the others, even Ramon Delvayes stood silent. Malinche studied the chunky haunches, the set of legs and shoulders, pastern and eyes, at last the teeth. Then the brooding, keen glance went to Don Ferrer. "Who owns him?"

"This man, Señor Hood," Don Ferrer said.

"He'll sell?" Malinche said.

"No," Don Ferrer said. "But he's willing to work him here."

"With the bulls?" Malinche spoke fast.

"With any bull you've got," Joe said.

"Good," Malinche said, and took out and lit a coarse native cigarette. "We can use a horse like that."

Don Ferrer laughed. "In the morning," he said. "Not now. Julia, see that the gentlemen have a little food and a little beer."

ON either side of the living room fire Don Ferrer and Ramon Delvayes dozed. Ramon Delvayes held an empty beer bottle in his hand. It clattered as it slipped to the floor. Joe Hood raised upright at the sound, started from his chair. But Dona Julia remained motionless. "Thank you," she said. "The servant will pick it up."

"Yes, ma'am," Joe Hood said, unconsciously dropping into English. Then, beneath his breath, he cursed himself. He didn't know how to talk to a girl like this, he thought. He didn't know how to move in a house like this. There had been too many years in between, while his life had been spent with men of Malinche's type, and all his talk that meant anything of horses and cattle and men. He stared down at his hands, sinewy, sun-coarsened and calloused. Old Don Ferrer didn't have such hands, or drunken, careless Ramon, but their knowledge of his trade was quite complete and they could still talk to a lady.

"Tell me," Dona Julia said suddenly, "of what happened in La Cruz."

Joe Hood got up from the chair. What talking he could do was better on his feet, he realized, and when he stood the firelight was away from his face. "I don't know," he said slowly, "if there's much to tell you, *señorita.* Your brother and Don Ferrer were both very nice to me and brought me out here to work; that's all."

"A man was killed though," she said. "One of El Gallo's *capeadores.* Who killed him?"

"I did," Joe Hood said, and now his voice was harsh.

"Why?"

"Because—" He stopped, and his hands closed at his sides. She kept steadily staring at him, though, quiet in the deep chair, her smooth, brown-haired head held back. "It was sort of a personal thing," he went on. "Between me and El Gallo. Your brother helped me."

"El Gallo," she said, "cheated at dice. You and my brother were in the game. When you exposed El Gallo, my brother insisted on staying with you. Isn't that true?"

"That's true," Joe Hood said, feeling

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the blood thrust up through his throat into his cheeks and brow. "El Gallo and his *capeador* jumped me in the street. But your brother didn't have anything to do with it until he thought I was going to be killed. He—"

Dona Julia had risen. She crossed the room to pause near him. "I know my brother," she said. "I realize he is no good except when he is working with the bulls. His fault is that he is a gentleman, and that my uncle always pays any family debt. If he was with you in a drunken fight, I'm not surprised. I hope, though, you like it here at Canedon Mimosa. Maybe during your stay you can help Ramon. Good night."

Joe Hood brought the cracked heels of his boots together and tried a bow. "Good night, *señorita,*" he said, the words hoarse and slow.

He walked over to Don Ferrer when she was gone, shook the old man's shoulder. "I'm ready for a bit of sleep," he said. "And I want to get ready to meet those bulls."

"Hasta," Don Ferrer mumbled. "In the morning you'll see plenty of them, all you want. Where's Dona Julia?"

"I think," Joe Hood said, "she got bored talking to me. She just said good night."

Don Ferrer reached thoughtfully to kick his nephew. "Dona Julia is often bored," he said. "This is a man's house, and she resents the fact. Watch her, tomorrow, though, when we ride out for the bulls."

THE bulls were brought down from the high mountain pastures, running fast. Malinche and half a dozen Indian *vaqueros* handled them. They were all huge, powerful beasts and Malinche and his men on their small native ponies worked hard to get them into the stone-walled corrals behind the house.

Joe Hood sat waiting on the wall of the smallest corral. Don Ferrer and Dona Julia sat near him, but Ramon was down inside the place, striding the sandy surface with a wide cape in his hands. The look of sleepy carelessness had left Ramon. He was keen-eyed and tense, wore a loose pair of old trousers and thin sandals. "This is the first day of the Spring trial," Don Ferrer explained to Joe Hood. "We want to find out which are our best bulls. Ramon will work them with the cape to see whether they are rights or lefts—which way they charge and follow the cape. Then you'll go in with your Hombrecito, and we'll see what they do with a horse."

"Fine," Joe Hood said. "But what does it prove?"

Don Ferrer smiled, hearing the bulls snuffle and roar in the next enclosure. "This afternoon I'm having guests, most of the best bull-ring agents and *matadors* in Central America. The men who I hope are going to buy and fight my bulls. It's an annual event, and the thing which keeps Canedon Mimosa alive. That's why I hired you and Hombrecito, to help show off the bulls. . . . You're ready, Ramon?"

"Start them in," Ramon said. He stood back from the barred gate, the cape low against his knees.

"Ahi va," Don Ferrer called. "Let's have the first, Malinche!"

The bull was booming against the gate before Malinche and the *vaqueros* had it half way open. Then the beast charged. Ramon took backward and sidewise steps. The cape fluttered and dipped in his hands.

The bull whirled, head low and to the left. The broad-set horns took the sunlight darkly, glittered as they held motionless. Ramon stamped his foot. The bull charged again. Ramon sent it right by him, almost into the wall. He turned it with the cape tight about his body and then with the cape extended at arms' length.

"Enough," Don Ferrer called. "He's *flamenco,* a real one. Keep him now for the horse."

Malinche and two of the *vaqueros* were in the corral with long poles. They prodded the bull towards a corner, blocked it there. "Now," Don Ferrer said, "it is your turn, Joe Hood. Bring in your horse."

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Joe Hood glanced quickly at Dona Julia as he slipped down outside the wall. She leaned forward, and her slender body was as tense as her brother's had been when he faced the bull. There was high color in her face, and her hands were locked. She sat as if at some splendid performance of the opera or theater, Joe Hood thought. That was the inheritance of her pure Spanish blood: a man's sport was a woman's also at Canedon Mimosa. The only place she did not follow her men was to their carousing and gambling in the town.

Hombrecito was trembling slightly as Joe Hood examined his girth and head stall. Hombrecito sensed the bulls and maybe didn't like them. But he was willing to go in, Joe Hood thought; he wasn't afraid.

There was another gate at the rear of the corral. Malinche was beside it. He gave Joe Hood a long, padded pole. "You know the job?" he asked.

"I should," Joe Hood said. "Both you and Don Ferrer have told me what to do. I take my horse in, keep his right side to the bull. I tempt the bull, and when he makes a charge, keep him off with this."

Malinche grunted. "It'll take more than that to keep him off you. We'll be in there, too, with a couple more poles. What do you say?"

"Open it," Joe Hood said, up in the deep, silver-mounted saddle, the pole balanced at his right hip.

HE ADVANCED Hombrecito with small steps, keeping his feet under him. Across the place, fifteen feet away, the bull rested motionless. For the first time, staring hard-eyed, Joe Hood fully understood the grace and tremendous killing power of the beast.

This bull was nearly black in color, but beneath the smooth, shining hide the muscles gathered layer on layer. He was of Don Ferrer's special breed, a mixture of the Miura and Villa Hermosa, two of the most famous fighting stocks in the world. He weighed close to a ton, was supposed to run and maneuver faster than a horse. *"Olé, toro!"* Joe Hood called. "Let's see you go."

The soft ears at the base of the vast, cruel horns raised and flickered. The yellowish eyes contained a glare that was a concentrate of all savagery. Slowly, just a little bit, the head lowered and the long, narrow tail swung. Sand slashed beneath the hoofs in the opening sweep of the charge.

Joe Hood kept Hombrecito head on for several seconds more. Then he drew slightly on the reins. Hombrecito turned left, and up through his tautened knees Joe Hood could feel the white horse's easy muscular gathering. Hombrecito wasn't afraid. Hombrecito already realized he was faster than the bull.

Joe Hood leaned down, out from the big saddle. He gripped the pole with the padded butt against his side. He gauged in between the horn points, let the bull take the blow there.

The bull's head, the horns, were swung sidewise by the blow. Every ounce of Joe Hood's and Hombrecito's strength were behind the stout pole. The pole bent, whipped high. The huge fore shoulder of the bull came on, grazed Hombrecito's flank. Up on the wall, Dona Julia parted her hands and let go a faint scream. But Hombrecito was in motion and past the bull.

Joe Hood looked up and grinned. The white-haired old man was clapping and crying *"Bravo!"* Now the girl joined him. She lifted her hand in a kind of tacit salute to Joe Hood; for an instant her eyes met his, and then she was watching the bull again. Her face looked queer and taut.

"Watch," Joe Hood muttered. "Here's what a Texas horse can do." He turned Hombrecito on his hind hooves alone, the fore off the sand. Then he ran Hombrecito right around the bull. He jabbed the bull a dozen times with the pole, between the horns again, and against the ribs and the immense pad of rippling muscle on the neck.

Froth began to form at the bull's

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nostrils. Sweat stained the shiny coat and the eyes blinked red. "Enough," Malinche called, sprinting from the gate. "Take your time. This is just the first."

Joe Hood brought short rein on Hombrecito and spat into the sand. "Is the rest of the stuff," he asked, "any better?"

A quick curse came from Malinche, and he stared over at Ramon Delvayes, silent by the far gate. "You've got a fast horse," he said. "Faster than any bull."

Between them that morning Joe Hood and Ramon Delvayes worked more than a dozen bulls. Some were stupid, uneager to fight at all. But most of them took the challenge of the cape or the white horse's flank, charged time and again until the *vaqueros* shunted them out. "You've stolen my act," Ramon said when the last was gone. "The wise boys will be watching you and your horse this afternoon, not me. Let's go in and have a drink."

Joe Hood had dropped from the saddle, stood rubbing down Hombrecito. "I didn't know," he said, "that you were so good with the cape. But do you want to start drinking now?"

Ramon made his characteristic grimace. "Sure," he said. "One or three cocktails, no more. That bunch coming in this afternoon will take Don Ferrer's word for most of it. We've already done the hard work. All they'll want to see is the picked bulls and a bit of your tricky business with the horse. If a bull is worked with the cape too much, he gets wise, and a *matador* gets killed. Working against a horse is different."

"Your sister," Joe Hood said, "seems to worry a good deal about a horse's chances."

"She's that way," Ramon said. "Julia can't entirely get over the idea that fighting bulls is a masculine sport. And she loves good horses. But you're the guy who owns Hombrecito."

"That's not all the answer," Joe Hood said, very low, staring after the slim, straight-bodied girl where she walked towards the house besides Don Ferrer. "Maybe I'm wrong in working him here."

"She'll tell you so when she's convinced of it," Ramon said. "Let's go get our drink."

III

THE men who gathered at Canedon Mimosa that afternoon were an odd lot. Some of them were of Don Ferrer's caste, of the old, proud families whose lineage ran unbroken back to Castille and Aragon. But the others were tough, harsh-voiced and garishly dressed, bullfighters and ring agents and managers, who drank deep and laughed and cursed a lot. Dona Julia moved among them quietly, seeing that each one got food and liquor, but never staying long with any certain group. Joe Hood watched her from the corner of the huge living room he had chosen for himself. She doesn't like any part of it, he thought. Still, her folks are Don Ferrer and Ramon, and they're bull-minded lads, and it's her duty to play host for them. If she doesn't care much for this bunch, what can she think about you?

He almost asked her that when she came toward him followed by a servant carrying trays of food and liquor, but somehow he could not form the words.

"I hope," she said to him, "you'll be a bit more careful in the corral this afternoon. Hombrecito is a very fine horse."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and fumbled a sandwich onto the floor. She was gone when he straightened up, and only the impassive Indian servant woman was there. "Hombrecito, hell!" he grunted. For a moment he hated the horse.

He was careful, though, when he took Hombrecito out there before them in the corral. Hombrecito was a bit tired, and now the bulls had begun to learn how the horse moved. Twice, he just cleared the white flank from a horn point, got away. His own body ached from the pounding of the pole and he hardly heard the wide yells and cheering of the men grouped on the wall, was very glad when Malinche muttered up to him, *"Finito.* Take him out now, lad. You're done."

He rode Hombrecito at a walk toward

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the stable. Hibiscus and other flowering shrubs grew about the stable door and he didn't see Dona Julia until he lowered his head to enter. She stood beside a stall dressed in riding breeches and boots, was throwing a saddle up onto the back of a neat gray mare. "I'm sorry," he told her quickly, remembering how he had spilled the sandwich, "that you didn't stay and see us work this afternoon. It was easy enough. I've had Hombrecito since he was foaled, and we know each other pretty well."

"Thank you," she said, straightening the saddle and making fast the cinch strap. "I saw all I wanted this morning. But would you like to take a short ride with me? Hombrecito looks like he needs a run after all that close work."

"Yes, ma'am," Joe Hood said, but deliberately.

The way she took him was high up into the far pastures. The wind had a soft wailing there, and the grass swayed before it. Sun slanted on the *cordillera* peaks in a flashing vermillion coruscation. She stopped to stare toward those peaks, at last at him.

"What are you doing here?" she said. "This is no place for you—for a horse as fine as yours. The sale of the bulls is the end of any real work here for months."

"I came along with you," Joe said, "and kept away from that lot of men at luncheon just so I wouldn't have to answer questions. I knew they'd ask me why I got into a fight with El Gallo. Which was my business, and isn't theirs. But you—"

"You needn't answer me."

"Sure," Joe Hood said. "But I'm going to. Your brother helped save my life. Your uncle got me out of jail. So let me tell you. . . . I'm here because I'm not good enough to be anywhere else. I'm a *campanista,* an old-fashioned horse wrangler, and it's a trade that's dying out. After that, I'm a gambling man, and I gambled away all I had in Texas. Since then, I've been all through these countries, down to the Argentine, and back. When I met El Gallo—and your brother—I was on my way home. But El Gallo was crooked and took all my money. Now I'm glad to work for anybody, take any kind of job."

She nodded, the sunlight like a strange and lovely, fragile helmet upon her hair. "I understand," she said. "Ramon is that way."

Joe Hood pulled Hombrecito around almost savagely. "You want to say," he said, "that Ramon is a bum unless he works at the one job he knows, with the bulls."

"Yes," she said. She kept her horse in stride with Hombrecito. "That is quite right."

They rode in silence then, back down the shadowed slopes. At the corrals, though, they slowed again. The *vaqueros* were working the bulls out of the corrals and into big, caged trucks and carts. Joe Hood counted: fourteen bulls were going. They were taking all of them that had shown any fight. He glanced suddenly aside at her. "Don Ferrer," he said, "is getting rid of plenty."

The steadiness of her eyes did not change, or the calm expression of her face. "How much do you think," she asked, "it cost Don Ferrer to get you and Ramon out of jail?"

Joe Hood sat still. He held Hombrecito back while she sent her horse on to the stable. He watched the bulls and the sweaty, weary faces of the *vaqueros*. Then, when he was sure she was gone, he nudged Hombrecito. The anger, the anger he felt against himself, was so great he was choked. It wouldn't make any sense to try to talk to her, he realized. Ramon was the one to answer him now, or Don Ferrer. Anyhow, he was through here. That one sentence she had said had done it, that and the abrupt and certain knowledge he loved her, and she despised him.

ALL the long-jawed *hacendados* and loud bull-ring men had left, he found. Only Don Ferrer and Ramon and Malinche were in the living room. Don Ferrer sat with Malinche under the glow of a lamp, tallying long lines of figures in a ledger. They did no more than nod to

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him. It was Ramon who looked up and called out from beside the fire.

Ramon was drunk, sprawled wide-legged. "Have a drink, *campanista,*" he said. "You've earned it. Don't worry about Julia—she's gone to her room."

Joe Hood sat next to him and grasped his arm tight. "I'll let the drink go," he said, "until I've found out how much Don Ferrer paid for you and me to clear us from that jam in La Cruz."

Ramon blinked and laughed. "Forget it," he said. "Don Ferrer is the executor of my and Julia's estate. When our parents died, he took over Canedon Mimosa for us. He runs it, and he has a lot of fun."

Joe Hood cursed, his voice rough-edged. "Make sense," he said, "I'm getting out of here as soon as I know what I cost Don Ferrer. I'm through being stupid and staying where I don't belong."

Ramon lifted to pour another drink. "Stupid if you go," he said. "Stupid if you think you can ever pay anybody back anything working as a *campanista.* No more money in that, and you know it. Not much more in bulls, but enough. Stay around here a bit, then you and I'll go fight bulls."

"You're drunk," Joe Hood told him harshly. "And you're foolish. But how much did your uncle put up for me in La Cruz?"

"Don't know, and not foolish," Ramon said. "But I tell you that you and I can make money with the bulls. Lot of men here today said so. Two, three wanted to hire us, give us jobs."

"Why?" Joe Hood increased the force of his grip. "For what?"

"Because we're good, stupid. Because you and I could go into any bull-ring in Central America and make the other lads look like—like that." Ramon tried to snap his fingers and missed. "You, with your Hombrecito, and me, with cape—cape and sword."

Joe Hood pulled the other man upright in his chair. "They'd pay us, you mean, to fight in the ring?"

"Pay us plenty. They talked to Don Ferrer and Malinche. One of them wanted to leave a contract for us to sign. Fight next month in Panama City. You as my *picador,* on Hombrecito. Me as *matador.* Don't laugh—used to fight as amateur when I was at school in Spain. Fought three times in the ring at La Cruz when they could get me sober. . . . Go ask Malinche if I wasn't good. Malinche was a *banderillero* once; he placed the barbs for Louis Freg, the best Mexican of them all. Go ask him and—"

But Joe Hood was already on his feet. Don Ferrer and the hard-faced foreman were coming to the fire. Don Ferrer carried the ledger under his arm, turned a smiling glance on Joe Hood. "I wanted to tell you," he said. "But Ramon thinks he is your only friend around here and this is his night to get drunk and talk."

"I haven't got it straight yet," Joe Hood said. "I never was in a bull-ring in my life. What good would I be in the ring, with Hombrecito? Forget it. Just tell me what I cost you in La Cruz."

"It's here," Don Ferrer said, and tapped the ledger. "When it's paid, I'll tell you. But you forget again about Hombrecito, or you wouldn't ask what good you'd be in the ring. Tell him that, Malinche."

"You'd be real good," Malinche said flatly. "I say so, and I worked the bulls in the ring for eighteen years. All you've got to do there is what you did today. But in the ring you'd have a real *pic,* a pole with a fine cold steel on the end of it. You could stop any bull before he got near your horse. You'd have the crowds down out of the stands to kiss that Hombrecito."

"To hell," Joe Hood said, "with the crowds, and the whole idea. A ring horse is just an old plug that's a target for the bulls. He has got to go in blind-folded and wear big leather pads that'd make Hombrecito knock-kneed."

"No," Malinche said. He grinned. "That's the answer. Why these lads who were here today are willing to pay you and Don Ramon real money. Your Hom-

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brecito wouldn't have any pads. You'd ride him without. And all the time the crowd would be waiting for the bull to gore him, flip his guts out. But that horse is too smart, and fast. No bull can lay a horn on him if he's handled right. The crowd doesn't know that, though, and the crowd thinks first the bull will get him, and afterward get Ramon. But your job with the *pic* will do it. You'll put the *pic* so deep into the bull he'll be like butter when Ramon gets him. You understand me?"

"Yes," Joe Hood said. "But I don't believe you. The usual stunt is to have the bull gore the horse so the bull's neck gets tired. So his head is down when the *matador* gets him. How could Hombrecito and I do that?"

"With the *pic*," Malinche said, swiftly. "The good old, sharp steel *pic*. And that horse of yours, the way he throws his body in every time you make a thrust. You don't believe me, *Yanqui*, but I'm willing to prove it to you. I'm willing to go back in the ring and make up an outfit with you and Ramon. You, with the *pic* and your horse, me with the *banderillas* and Ramon with the sword. No outfit in Central America could touch us. In one season alone, we'd be wealthy men. Guys like El Gallo—"

"I can fight better than El Gallo," Ramon broke in, "sitting down and cockeyed drunk."

They laughed then, all together, and Joe Hood held his hand out, to each of them in turn. "You know bulls," he said. "You've seen me and my horse work. I hope you're right."

"We're right," Don Ferrer said, and reached for the bottle. "Here's to it."

Joe Hood waited for an instant before he drank, the thought of the brown-haired, quiet girl dark across his brain. "When do we leave here?" he asked. "How soon do we start?"

"Tomorrow," Don Ferrer said. "As soon as you want."

"Good," Joe Hood said. He drank very deep.

IV

JOE HOOD rode from Canedon Mimosa with the memory of Dona Julia before his eyes. She was very calm in parting, did no more than touch his hand. "I wish you good luck," she told him. "But be careful with Hombrecito, will you?"

"Hombrecito," Joe Hood said, "is still my only ticket to Texas. I'll have to be careful with him."

He nearly forgot her and those words, though, in the weeks that followed. His life was suddenly new, strange and tremendously exciting. After a few days of training in a private ring, he and Hombrecito fought for the first time at Panama City. It was a big Sunday *corrida* with pretty good fighters on the card. He and Hombrecito stole the show; the crowd pitched hats, flowers and money at them when they were through. Men jumped down into the ring and surrounded him and the white horse four and five deep. "A horse," they kept repeating, "a horse that is tougher than the bulls!"

Joe Hood kneed them aside and sent Hombrecito back toward the *portal*. There was more to it than what they said, he knew. It wasn't all the bull and the horse. The real element of success or death rested with himself. Hombrecito wore no armor of any sort. If he once slipped in that intensely brief instant of the *pic* thrust, Hombrecito would never fight or run again. The pink-rosetted mules would drag him out of the ring the way they did the usual skinny nags, at the end of a chain, bloody intestines scrawling the sand.

He began to have nightmare dreams about his own strength and skill. He saw himself miss, the *pic* point glance by the bulged mass of neck muscles, and then the horns tearing Hombrecito, tearing him. For a time he spent all his waking hours experimenting with the *pic* and various types of grips and balances. In the cafés and hotels of the cities where he and Ramon and Malinche were called to work as the season went on he talked incessantly with the other fighters. There was a lot

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he had to learn about the bulls, he realized. They were a lot tougher, quicker than he had thought. Some day he and Hombrecito were going to meet one who knew enough to change his charge in the last couple of strides. . . .

"Cut it out," Malinche grumbled once. "You'll talk us into the *mala racha*—real bad luck. Forget the bulls until you're in there. Let Ramon and me do the worrying about you. If your thrust is no good, we suffer; I probably get tossed putting in the *banderillas* and Ramon is gored when he tries the cape."

"All the *Yanquis* are like that," Ramon said, looking up from a drink. "They've got a conscience. He just wants us to tell him he's good. But wait until we fight in Mexico City. El Galla's fighting on the card with us there. When he sees how rotten El Gallo is he won't worry any more about what's good."

They came across El Gallo their first night in Mexico City and the night before the fight. He was very gay and well-dressed, moved over to their café table at once. "You're doing all right, *Yanqui,*" he told Joe Hood. "Pulling these two crocks along with you is no easy job. But this town is different. It takes more than a trick white horse and a smart *picador* to cover up a fake fighter around here. Keep on your toes, Delvayes, or you'll wish you were back in that jug in La Cruz. Your uncle can't—"

Ramon was starting up from the table, but Joe Hood was before him. It was Malinche who stopped them, a bottle in his hand. "I'll brain either of you," he said. "This *hijo* is out to make trouble any way he can." The bottle neck snapped jagged as Malinche cracked it on the table edge. He made a delicate, descriptive little gesture with it toward El Gallo. "Not tonight, punk. But tomorrow night, unless you pull out of here quick."

El Gallo cursed him, slowly backing away. Malinche turned, his eyes somber as he looked at Joe Hood and Ramon. "I didn't tell you pair of game cocks before," he said. "Now I will. They're coming up here from Canedon Mimosa tomorrow. They'll be here for the fight."

Joe Hood waited for a long moment to speak. He made his voice low, and deliberate. "Don Ferrer," he asked, "and Dona Julia?"

"So," Malinche said. "And I'm not the guy to see Don Ferrer get you out of jail twice. Come on. Let's get to bed."

THE sun came wide into the hotel room, brought a bright luster from Ramon's ring uniform. He stood with Don Ferrer and Malinche, laughing a little as he tested his supple-bladed swords. Joe Hood rested by the window, gazing down into the plaza, unwilling yet to watch the girl beside him. "I talked to Don Ferrer this morning," he said. "I wanted to find out how much I owed him. He finally told me. My share of the fight today will make me square with him."

"Does that really matter?" Dona Julia said. "Does it make you happy?"

"Not a bit," Joe Hood said. Then he swung, so he could see her face. "But it gives me a chance I've been waiting for a long time. I'm through with Hombrecito after today. I'm giving him to you."

"Why?" she said, quite quickly.

"It's an easy answer," Joe Hood said. "I'm in love with you, and I can get back to Texas without Hombrecito."

Her small body became rigid. Color rose into her face. "You've picked," she said, "a rather odd time to tell me."

"The whole thing is odd," Joe Hood said. "The way I met your brother and met you, the reason why I'm here now, like this."

"But you couldn't have waited until after the fight?"

Joe Hood tried to grin. "I always gamble on hunches," he said. "I'm not sure you'd want to see me, after the fight."

"I don't—" she began.

"I know," Joe Hood broke in. "There's no need for you to tell me. I'm giving you Hombrecito because you love him. I never kidded myself into the idea that you might love me." He gave her a short bow then,

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the way he had learned to bow from Ramon, and went swiftly toward the door. . . .

The first bull was one of the big gray Atencos of the best Mexican breed. Joe Hood took him quickly from the cape-workers, and close by the barrier. He ran with him twice, up and down the ring, estimating the speed and stride, the manner the bull used his head. Then in the middle of the ring he slowed Hombrecito.

A strange, almost feverish elation held him. He felt very keen, and very sure. Behind the barrier on the lowest row of seats he could see Dona Julia beside Don Ferrer. He was fighting for her now, he thought, and not for this collection of dolts up in the stands. Before he hit north for Texas he was going to leave her with a memory she'd never forget. Long after he was gone, she'd tell the man she married how he and Hombrecito had fought here.

Hombrecito was starting to work in toward the bull. Hombrecito knew his own job now, Joe Hood thought. The white horse had become a real prima donna. Most any man—a man as stupid as El Gallo—could handle him and the bulls. But Dona Julia didn't understand that, never would.

The bull roared in his charge. Hombrecito positioned sidewise, poised still and straight. The horns swept low at the slender white withers, to pull and rip up, fling the horse over. "Come on, bull!" Joe Hood said, and struck with the *pic*.

Hombrecito leaned in with the blow. His strength and weight went in perfect timing with Joe Hood's outward and downward motion. Between them and the bull was nothing but the arching, trembling, steel-tipped lance. Yet that kept them from the bull. That stopped the bull. A snorted grunt came from the bull. The horns lowered, the great neck bent, and beneath the *pic* point blood rose in a swift scarlet jet.

Joe Hood sat back in the saddle, feeling the concussion of the thrust through his body to his eyes. He had bit his under lip and the taste of his blood was salt. He laughed. It was better than his and Hombrecito's blood out on the sand.

Malinche was sending the cape-workers out from the barrier. They laughed as they took the bull away, snarling their capes on the horns. But the crowd was up and their shouts clashed and crossed in a high tumult. Joe Hood lifted his hand to point to Hombrecito. Flowers fell about him like an odd snow, hats skimmed between Hombrecito's legs and gold coins flipped in glittering loops. He came grinning in to the barrier. "Now let El Gallo try his stuff," he told Malinche.

Malinche stared at him narrow-eyed. "You outsmarted yourself," he said. "You were just a bit too good."

"How?" Joe Hood snapped, and then saw Ramon on the fighter's bench. Ramon sat with his head in his hands, his face gone pale beneath the sun bronze. "This way," Malinche said, also watching Ramon. "He's stuck with the real job, before El Gallo comes in at all. And the crowd is primed for great stuff, after your job. Unless Ramon does a superb bit, the crowd will call him a tramp. They'll chase him out of here."

"Listen," Joe Hood said. "You don't know how tough my job is. How easy it is to miss, every time."

"Maybe not," Malinche said. "But I know bulls, and I know men. You've made it tough for Ramon, and that bull is still full of fight."

"Shut up," Ramon said, suddenly down there next to them. "I can handle my bit." But he was stiff, slow-moving when the bugles sounded and he went forth trailing the crimson cape to challenge the bull.

THE bull was across the ring, motionless in an angle of shadow. Ramon walked forward to it and widely swirled the cape. He made four passes before the bull moved, and then it took a single stride, stopped.

A jerring whistle rose from the crowd. Orange rinds pelted down, hit Ramon and the bull. Ramon looked up and cursed the

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crowd. Legs and arms taut, he made a direct frontal pass at the bull. The horns lashed the cape, caught it. Then the bull ran, tearing and trampling the cape.

The crowd laughed. Bottles were flung down to roll against Ramon's feet. He was shaking with rage when he returned to the barrier. "Give me the *muleta,*" he said. "The *muleta* and the sword."

"Don't take the sword yet," Malinche said. "You'll have to work that one some more. If the head isn't down you'll get tossed."

Ramon turned to stare at Joe Hood. "My *picador* fixed it," he said. "He and his horse are the whole show—and I'm what El Gallo called me. If I get tossed, the crowd will just yell for them again."

"You're not funny," Joe Hood said. "You might get hurt out there. Take your time. Get set with the bull."

"I'm so funny," Ramon said, "they're still laughing at me. Stand back!" He strode forward swiftly with the *muleta*-cape and sword.

The hand Joe Hood held about Hombrecito's bridle rein drew tight. He glanced beyond the barrier at Dona Julia. She sat very still at Don Ferrer's side. She did not seem to breathe. She watched the ring, the strides her brother took, steadily advancing to the bull. "This is your hunch," Joe Hood said, silently. "This is the way you pay off. You'd give her your horse, but help the guy who saved you lose his life."

It happened quite fast. Ramon tried a pass known as *a voliapé,* then profiled for his sword thrust. The bull impaled him with the right horn, low in the left thigh, pitched him headlong. The women in the crowd screamed, but the men were still laughing. Joe Hood thought he could distinguish the sound of Dona Julia's voice as he started to run.

Malinche was with him. There was a big work cape in Malinche's hands and he yelled, "Go on, you clown! Leave this for me!"

"Like hell," Joe Hood said. But the bull was around and at them. It reared straight at Malinche. Malinche didn't have a chance. He spread the cape and tried to pivot, went prone with the horn jab through his shoulder. Joe Hood swung on his heels, yelled, clapped his hands. At the full gallop, for perhaps fifty yards, the bull followed him.

The thrust Ramon had partly finished had left the sword swaying between the horns. The bull tossed and stamped to get it free. It flung drumming to the sand near Joe Hood. He reached, and took it in his hand. He stood with his weight foward, lightly balanced.

Other men were running from the barrier; he could see them from the corners of his eyes. El Gallo was among them, and made a lot of noise in a high-pitched voice. "Come on," Joe Hood said, talking to himself. "You're better than that *hijo.* You're good enough to die alone."

There was no reason for a cape, he knew. The bull had learned to look past the cape, stab and smash at the man beyond. This would be like the thrust he made from Hombrecito's back, except that now he didn't have Hombrecito's weight and strength and skill. This was all alone, the way Ramon did it, man and bull.

HE LEAPT in a kind of sidewise plunge at the bull. He meant to clear the horn point, pierce deep over the horn. The bull struck so fast he was not aware he was down until he felt the sand against his back. Pain clamped him heavily and he cursed. "You're stupid," he said. "You know this one works left." He got up then and fumbled for the sword. It was in his grasp, he was turning to the bull, rigid a yard away, when he saw Hombrecito and the running men.

Hombrecito came right through them. He butted them aside and bowled El Gallo sprawling. His hoofs made a small, quick thunder which suddenly stopped.

Joe Hood looked vaguely at him. "You and me, hey?" he mumbled. "Just a pair of show-offs. Get to hell out of here. My turn first, anyhow." Tottering, he strode at the bull.

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It was his memory later that Hombrecito rose straight over his shoulders. But in that moment he saw nothing but the white, flashing legs and the black hoofs as they cracked at the bull. Hombrecito advanced in bucking, vaulting rushes. He hit the bull a number of times, how many Joe Hood did not know. But the bull swung to get away, one horn splintered by a hoof blow, blood down the blunt, dark head.

Joe Hood veered to clench the splintered horn. He brought the sword short and stabbed twice. Then he could not pull the sword out. It was deep, deep in the bull's heart, and the bull was dead. . . .

Where Dona Julia sat was in shadow. Joe Hood was aware she was there by the slow sound of her breathing and the scent of her hair. It took a lot of effort for him to speak. "Ramon," he said. "How's Ramon?"

"He'll be fine," she said. "So will Malinche. You are the only one who was badly hurt. Be quiet now. The doctor told me I could sit here if I didn't talk to you."

"To hell," Joe Hood said, "with the doctor. Where's my horse, Hombrecito?"

"Don Ferrer has him," she said. "He's getting him ready to take back to Canedon Mimosa."

"You want him, then?"

"Yes." The word was whispered.

He turned a little bit on the bed. But he was unable to see her face. He found her hand, though, clasped it lightly. "You don't have to wait here," he said. "I've been hurt before. I know this one isn't too bad."

"You've a broken leg," she said. "And three broken ribs. The doctors say you can't be moved for a couple of weeks." She leaned down then, close over him, and her hair was fragrant against his face. "You didn't give me time this afternoon. So I'll have to tell you now. I love you. I love you a very great deal. Does that—help at all?"

He laughed softly before he kissed her. "A lot," he said.

"But Hombrecito," she said, "was your ticket home."

"He's still yours," he said.

"No," she said. "He'll be yours, too, at Canedon Mimosa."

"I haven't talked to him," Joe Hood said. "But I think he'll get to like that place."

Du Shalt Not

IT is probably significant that, while most people manage to get along with Ten Commandments, the Nazis have thirteen. This fact may mean a number of things, of course; perhaps the Nazis need more than the usual quota of commandments, or on the other hand, they may be the chosen people to be thus blessed. Anyway, the National Socialist Year Book for 1938 lists thirteen.

The first law, simply and clearly put, is not surprising: "The Fuehrer is always right." A comforting premise. . . . "Do not waste your time in chatter and self-complacent criticism," the third says; "and lend a hand at work". . . . Then there is Number Nine, a variation on an old idea, with reservations that leave plenty of leeway: "Treat your racial comrades as you wish to be treated". . . . Anyone would applaud Eleven: "Courage is not rowdyism." That one has a nice bearing on recent European developments. It's all right, Vienna; no good Nazi is a rowdy. . . . Rule Twelve states succinctly: "Right is whatever profits the [National Socialist] movement and therewith Germany—that is your people." That seems to clear everything up.

—*Eric Sharpe.*

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MEN
KILLED BY A DRUNK
FOR 51 YEARS HE WAS A GUNMAN ON THE SIDE OF THE LAW, THE BULL'S-EYE IN HUNDREDS OF GUN FIGHTS, AND WAS NEVER HIT— THEN A FEW YEARS AGO HE WAS SHOT IN THE BACK BY A DRUNK WHO DIDN'T KNOW WHO HE WAS! THUS PASSED ONE OF THE BRAVEST, THE MOST GENTLEMANLY, FAIR AND LOYAL MEN THE WEST EVER KNEW.
Bill Tilghman
LAST OF THE OLD-TIME MARSHALS TO DIE.
TILGHMAN WAS SCOUT, PLAINSMAN, INDIAN FIGHTER, SHERIFF AND U.S. MARSHAL, WHEN "THERE WAS NO SUNDAY WEST OF KANSAS CITY AND NO GOD WEST OF FORT SMITH."
AT 16 HE RAN AWAY TO BECOME AN INDIAN FIGHTER AND BUFFALO HUNTER— GETTING MEAT FOR THE RAILROADS HE KILLED 3000 IN 3 YEARS.' LATER HE BECAME A MARSHAL AND WAS THE BEST OKLAHOMA EVER HAD.'
THE BOY FROM ATCHISON, KANSAS EVEN OUTDID "BUFFALO BILL."
HE NEITHER SWORE, USED TOBACCO NOR DRANK, AND THE OUTLAWS SO RESPECTED HIS COURAGE AND FIGHTING ABILITY THEY AVOIDED HIM LIKE A PLAGUE, YET WHEN THEY WANTED TO SURRENDER THEY SENT FOR BILL AND SURRENDERED TO HIM. THEY KNEW THEY WOULD GET A SQUARE DEAL AND A SQUARE TRIAL. NO PRISONER OF HIS WAS EVER LYNCHED!

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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DARING
WHEN OKLAHOMA WAS THROWN OPEN TO THE "SOONERS," TOWNS SPRANG UP OVER NIGHT AND BAD-MEN FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY COLLECTED. SOON THERE WAS NO LAW AND HURRY-UP CALLS WERE SENT FOR MARSHAL BILL TO KEEP PEACE. HE SOON ARRIVED WITH HIS WINNING SMILE, HIS SILVER-MOUNTED SIX-SHOOTERS AND HIS SAWED-OFF RIFLE.
THE CITIZENS OF PERRY, OKLA., SENT FOR BILL TO RID THEM OF "CRESCENT SAM," PRIZE TORPEDO OF THE DOOLIN GANG. BILL ARRIVED AND TOLD SAM— "DON'T LET THE SETTING SUN FIND YOU ON THIS TOWN-SITE." REPLIED SAM: "IF THERE'S A HOMBRE THAT CAN SEND ME HOME TILL I'M READY, I'D LIKE TO SEE THE COLOR OF HIS HAIR." "THEN FILL YOUR HAND," SAID BILL. SAM FIRED FIRST. BILL FIRED TWICE—KILLED SAM AND WINGED HIS PAL WHO HAD ALSO TRIED TO JOIN THE FIGHT. TILGHMAN PUT AN END TO MANY AMBITIOUS BANDITS AFTER THAT. "ARKANSAS TOM," THE DALTON BROTHERS AND THE NOTORIOUS BILL DOOLIN SURRENDERED TO HIM.
ONE NIGHT, WHILE LOOKING FOR A CATTLE RUSTLER, BILL WANDERED INTO AN ABANDONED HUT. IN IT WAS THE ENTIRE BILL DOOLIN GANG! HE WAS SURROUNDED IMMEDIATELY. "THAT'S BILL TILGHMAN! KILL HIM," CRIED RED BUCK. "NO," SAID DOOLIN, "TILGHMAN IS TOO GOOD A MAN TO DIE LIKE THIS," AND COMMANDED THEM TO BACK UP SO THE MARSHAL COULD LEAVE UNMOLESTED. ABOUT A YEAR LATER TILGHMAN CAPTURED DOOLIN AT EUREKA SPRINGS. WHEN BILL TILGHMAN DIED, AT 71, THEY PLACED HIS BODY, WITH A MILITARY GUARD, FOR 3 DAYS IN THE ROTUNDA OF THE STATE CAPITOL. (THE FIRST CITIZEN TO BE SO HONORED)

Coming: Arthur Menken—Headline Shooter

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The Long Knives Ride

By FOSTER-HARRIS

Author of "Ready, Weeble and Willing," "Son of the Wolf," etc.

Over the prairie thundered the naked redskins—and 'mid the tumult of the wild war-cries five white fugitives had to decide a question of loyalty and sacrifice. A complete novelet

I

THE Quahada attack was so well masked, so murderously fast sprung, that even the shivering Tonkawa scout was caught flat-footed. He was dead before he could lift a death wail. Riding beside the lurching army wagon, Sergeant Stiegel, in command, had just time for one frantic command.

"Back! Back to the creek and dismount! Reed, turn—"

His shout was cut short, as a slug tore through his throat. His horse whirled crazily, spilling the non-com's body almost atop the first pair of dismounted, handcuffed men. With a lightning, desperate jerk, Neal Cordis, military prisoner, caught with his free hand at the yellow-striped legs.

"Grab him!" he lashed furiously at his fellow prisoner, ironed to his left wrist. "The dirty hunk's got the keys! Get him to cover or we're sunk."

A split second slower than Cordis in shaking off the stunned paralysis of the surprise, ex-corporal Vic Hunter cursed in sudden, savage comprehension. He stooped, gathering the stricken sergeant up left-handed, hugging him to his breast.

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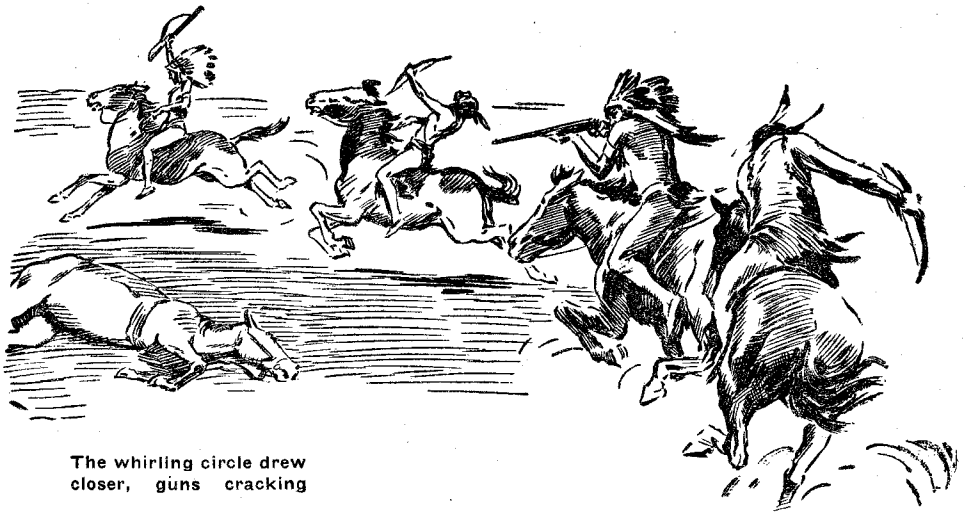

The whirling circle drew closer, guns cracking

"Run, man!" he gasped. "Swing! Look at 'em! Look at 'em!"

The whole, brushy hillside ahead and to the right was alive with screaming, charging, red warriors. On foot, that was the amazing part. Comanches attacking dismounted, separated from their horses. Even the Tonk had not expected that. Stumbling, running desperately to make it with his burden to the covering cut bank fifty paces in rear, Neal Cordis grunted with professional appreciation.

It had been well planned, well executed, this ambush. Good generalship on the part of the red commander, whoever he was. With any luck at all, he'd bag this whole detachment of hated blue troopers, in the next minute or so. And then . . .

Well then, at any rate, Ex-Sergeant Neal Cordis would never face that grim General Court Martial down at Fort Griffin. It was just as well, perhaps. Desertion in the field with arms in hand, horses—that G.C.M. would have handed out five years at least in Baton Rouge prison. Probably more. And even one year in that stinking death-hole . . .

The very air itself seemed to be one vast, hideous explosion now. Winchesters, Spencer cavalry carbines, revolvers were pounding deep rhythm. Back at the creek bank, Corporal Gregg was trying to form a rallying point. In complete rout, all the troopers still alive were spurring desperately toward him.

Twenty paces ahead Cordis could see big Sod Ryan and Joe Teel, the other two deserters, running like scared deer. Or the Irishman was running, rather. The shorter Teel, manacled to Ryan's wrist, was really flying like the tail of a kite. Despite his own situation Neal Cordis grinned thinly.

There was a wild clatter behind, and Vic Hunter wrenched them savagely aside. A spinning wheel just missed Cordis' shoulder. Driverless, the six-mule team hitched to the wagon had whirled of their own accord and were racing for the rear. They hit the bank at a slant and over the wagon went, over and over with a smashing crash. Through the hideous uproar Cordis heard the sick man inside scream.

Sprinting, he and Hunter with their convulsive burden had reached the cut bank. Stiegel had not even had time to draw his revolver before death had reached him. Cordis ripped the heavy weapon free from its holster, as he let the non-com's legs drop.

"Get that key," he screamed at Hunter, and whirled to breast the bank. The steel circle about his wrist cut deep into the

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flesh with the move, yet he scarcely felt it. He was armed at last, and his gun hand free. Swearing like a madman, Hunter was pawing at the sergeant's pockets.

He found the key, clicked himself free, and pounced for Stiegel's slung carbine. The red charge was driving home now. Shrewdly, knowing the temper of his undisciplined fighters, the Indian commander was stiffening the thrust with mounted men. They were lashing down from the crest in a screaming, foaming wave.

BUT of a sudden it was no longer a rout. There were six troopers against the bank, working carbines and revolvers with furious speed. Six left out of thirteen who had formed the detachment just a moment before. Yet now a resistance was organized. Automatically, shoulder to shoulder, the blue remnant was meeting the onslaught. And no attack lacking iron discipline could have roared right over those flaming muzzles.

These red riders did not even know the meaning of that word. Brave as any men on earth, they fought as Indians fight, each man for himself. A .50 caliber Spencer bullet knocked the splendid chief from his saddle, thirty feet from the bank. Immediately the whole cohesion of the charge was gone.

It stopped cold, milled an instant, then burst howling back.

Mounted and afoot, somehow miraculously carrying even their own dead and wounded, the Comanches were gone like flying smoke. His breath catching, Neal Cordis broke open his hot revolver, ejecting the empty shells as he turned.

There were just four still standing against the bank now. Or five, if you counted the limp, quivering Teel who still dangled from Sod Ryan's big wrist. Corporal Gregg was dead, and little Tom Vernon. Just one of the guard detail was left—Johnny Blaine. Cordis didn't even look at those troopers out there who hadn't made it to the cut bank. He knew what the Comanches had left of them.

"Begad, and the red divvils have done foine by us, haven't they?" said Ryan suddenly, in a dry, significant croak. "Turned us loose. Now all we got to do is run away. Arrah!" He grinned crookedly, then tugged at the irons linking him with the miserable recruit.

"Aw, git up, ye scut!" he barked. "Why yez couldn't have been kilt too, and before ye was aven born— Neal, for the love av Mike, don't tell me ye have lost the keys to these domn cuffs! Give them to me."

Abstractedly, Cordis lifted his left wrist, to which his own manacles still hung. The key was in the lock. He freed himself, tossed the keys to Ryan, and turned.

"He dead?" he asked Hunter who was stripping the belt from Stiegel's body. "How about his cartridges for this smoke pole?"

"Deader'n a doornail, the squarehead," nodded Hunter, and spat disgustedly. He had hated the big sergeant with good reason. Ripping the pistol cartridge pouch from the belt, he handed it to Cordis, and proceeded to refill the clumsy magazine of his own Spencer carbine.

Loading the cylinder of the sergeant's long Smith and Wesson, Cordis closed the weapon with a snap and looked thoughtfully at Blaine.

"Yes, looks like we might have at least a Chinaman's chance of missing that court-martial," he murmured, and straightened. "Better look in the wagon, Teel, see what's happened to Joe Lapp," he ordered, in a crisp, different voice. "Get his carbine and all the ammunition you can lay hands on anyhow. You, Blaine, see if you can catch those horses yonder and get the mules untangled. We'll be needing them."

The gray-faced Teel scrambled to obey. But Johnny Blaine shook his head uncertainly, with a slow, gathering scowl.

"Hold on," he rasped stubbornly. "You —you ain't in command here, Cordis. I reckon I am, if anybody is. You four guys, you're prisoners, deserters—"

There was instant silence, broken suddenly by the chick of Vic Hunter's cocking carbine. Face white, Blaine started

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desperately to fling up his own weapon. With a growl, Cordis jerked between them.

"Cut that, Vic!" he snapped, over his shoulder. Then, quietly, to Blaine: "We might as well get this straight right now, Johnny. We were prisoners, yes. But the scene's changed. Now we're four to your one. We know a little more about this sort of thing than you do, and we mean to get out of here alive. If we do, you can argue with us then, but meantime you'll do as we say. Because, if you don't—"

He didn't finish. But, when he motioned again, Blaine obeyed, moving sullenly down into the creek bottom to capture the riderless horses and untangle the kicking mules. With a grunt Hunter swung back against the bank.

"The damn, young fool!" he said. Cordis shook his head with a thin, bitter smile.

"He's all right, Vic. Just young." Lips abruptly tight, Cordis bent to strip the belt off Gregg and buckle it about his own waist.

THERE was yelling from the brush now, and scattered, ineffectual sniping. But the smashing stop put to their charge, plus the fall of the chief, seemed to have taken the heart out of the red assailants. Iced, uneasy wind ruffled over them and Sod Ryan shivered.

"Unless I miss my guess, we're goin' to have a norther blowin' in," he said dourly. Cordis nodded, glancing back toward the towering cloud masses to the north over the Staked Plains from which they had come.

"Looks that way," he agreed. "I hope so. It would make it a lot easier for us to get out of here."

A bullet splashed the top of the bank, and he took a quick, guarded look over, then crouched back. Driving cold, he knew, particularly with rain or sleet, would be as good as a dozen reenforcements. Nothing was better calculated to take the fight out of a naked Indian than one of the murderous, wet northers of these high Texas plains. It would be bitter for white men too, of course, doubly bitter to travel in. Yet such a norther just now could also be crowning good luck.

After months of scowling, capricious fortune seemed suddenly to have decided to smile on him again, Cordis mused. Without trusting the lady too far, or expecting overmuch, he was still very ready.

For the moment, he judged, they were all right. Their position in the narrow, steep-walled creek bed could scarcely be overwhelmed save by a straight charge seventy yards or more across the flat, bare open. Having tried that once and failed, the Indians would hardly essay it again. Not right away, anyhow. With dark, it might be different, but dark was hours off yet. And if that norther just struck soon, and hard enough . . .

Cordis twisted, looking back down at the creek bottom. Three of the troop horses had stopped down there, and Johnny Blaine was already tying their bridle reins to a wheel of the overturned wagon. The other scared mounts had scattered to the winds. But there was the mule team, with even a driver's saddle on the near-wheel animal. Five or six sound mounts, anyhow, arms all around, plenty of ammunition and rations in the wagon. Eyes narrowing, Cordis nodded slowly.

He heard Teel's muffled, horrified exclamation and saw the recruit crawl hurriedly from under the ripped wagon cover. He had obeyed orders. There was a carbine in his hands, and a couple of packets of cartridges. He pointed back into the wreckage, calling out in a loud, shaky voice.

"He—he's in there, Cordis! Lapp. He's dead. His neck's broke, looks like. He's all twisted."

"All right." Cordis felt almost relieved. He had had nothing against poor Lapp. But a desperately sick man, not a deserter, would have added considerably

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to his problem just now. He lifted his gaze to the north and drew an exultant breath.

Luck definitely was with him at last. No doubt of it now, that norther was coming fast. Under the churning clouds, just above the rim of the prairie, Cordis could see a line of deep blue. "Blue norther!" This early in the year it would probably be a lulu.

"They're swarmin' to try it again, boys!" warned Hunter sharply from the bank, and Cordis whirled. "Everybody, stand to!" his voice crackled. "Hold your fire, until we see whether they mean business. But if they come out of the brush, let 'em have it!"

Atop the ridge, mounted warriors again had appeared in a wide, flickering line. The firing and whooping from the stunted, mesquite thicket built up to crescendo. Certainly the Comanches could see what was coming, and hoped to get this over with in a hurry. After a deal of self-encouragement—wild whooping and aimless circling—here they came.

BUT this time the charge scarcely got ten yards past the edge of the brush. Charging disciplined riflemen under cover was different from chasing surprised, scattered men in the open. The .50 caliber seven-shot Spencers talked in discouraging thunder, and the half-hearted attack washed back. Levering open the breech of his hot carbine, Sod Ryan blew into the barrel and turned with a grin.

"Lots of yellin', begad," he said wryly. "But, Teel, me lad, that toime ye done all right. I watched yez."

"I got one, didn't I?" A change had come over the recruit. The weapon in his hands had worked magic. He had stopped shaking, and his eyes were wide, excited. "Sergeant, I got one!" He swung jubilantly toward Cordis. "Knocked him right out of his saddle!"

Cordis smiled. "You'll make a soldier," he approved, and caught himself too late. The mockery of the old phrase here! Mouth suddenly bleak, he looked away.

"Well, I guess that will be all for the time from our red brothers," he said with an effort. "Better get back to the wagon, Teel. Drag out the ammunition first, and then the rations. You, Sod, you better help him. We— Wait a minute!"

He grimaced apologetically at the ring of faces. "Since we're all jailbirds together except you, Blaine, maybe we better take a vote on what we do next, eh? We could stay right here. If that's really a bad storm coming, the Indians aren't likely to stick it out. We could right the wagon then, and go on to Fort Griffin. We'd probably get some credit for turning ourselves in."

"Yeah, four years in the mill, mebbe, instead av foive," nodded Ryan harshly. "To hell wid that, Neal. What else?"

"Pack up, pull out as soon as that norther hits," explained Cordis briefly. "The Indians haven't got us ringed in, you'll notice. There'll likely be enough dust or rain to cover us, if we take a chance and cut straight back north at the first blow. We've got everything we need here for a getaway, and we'll never have a better opportunity."

"But you can't—" began Blaine sharply, only to be stopped short by Hunter.

"Hold it, Johnny!" The big ex-corporal shifted his carbine. "You ain't got neither a voice nor a vote, see? You're just comin' along for company, if you come. If you'd ruther stay here—" He shrugged coldly. "All right, Cordis, go on."

"Why, that's about all." Cordis hesitated, glancing again at the north. "You better go finish untangling those mules, Johnny," he said quietly to Blaine. And, in a lower voice, when the trooper had gone:

"If we can shake these Indians, I think we might as well do just what we were trying when they caught us. Head straight north for Kansas. We could swing east, till we hit the cattle trails across The Nations, and maybe miss more Indian trouble. But these Texas towns—"

"Yeah," Hunter broke in with a wry

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grimace. His voice took on an exaggerated whining drawl. "Thu'ty dollahs reward, suh, for ever' deserteh we'uns kaitch from the damn Yankee ah'my! And how we Johnny Rebs do love to kaitch 'em, suh!"

"And ye're the lad did four years in th' ribil ar'rmy!" grinned Ryan, then sobered. "I'm wid yez, Cordis. Due north it is, and domn th' Injuns! But what are we goin' to do about Blaine yonder?"

"Take him along, if he wants to go," said Cordis slowly, after a pause. "What else can we do?" There was no answer to that, evidently, for nobody made one.

"Well, I guess you'll be enough guard, Vic." Cordis turned quickly. "The rest of you, come on. We got a job of packing up to do."

They moved down to the wagon, hauling out supplies and making their preparations for a getaway almost in dead silence. Cordis improvised packs for two of the mules. There was at least ammunition aplenty, their overcoats, and enough food to see them through provided they weren't too long en route. Also, there certainly would be game enough, buffalo by the thousands a bit farther north. But it would be better than two hundred miles, through hostile Indian country. And at any time a blizzard, perhaps this very one coming, might force them to hole up for days.

II

THEY were about four days' march from Fort Griffin, almost due east, and three from the supply camp, north and west on the fresh water fork of the Brazos. Probably by now the Old Man himself had reached camp, Cordis thought. If Colonel McAuer had only been there four days ago instead of out with a column, scouring the Pease River for elusive hostiles . . .

The floodgates of bitter memory were suddenly open now, and Cordis smiled grimly. Trying to desert, in the heart of the Indian country! It had been not quite as crazy as it sounded, but mad enough. Also, it had been a forced choice. A man can stand only so much.

For a year before this hurried mobilization for a winter Indian campaign the regiment had been split up in one and two troop stations all over south Texas. Cordis' outfit, K Troop, had drawn a particularly isolated border post. And then, to set the stage for trouble, it had rated also a new troop commander, First Lieutenant Carl Dealey and a new sergeant, Stiegel.

Dealey, fresh from staff duty in the East, was one of those unfortunate failures of the Military Academy, a graduate who had absorbed all the hardness of the code the Point teaches, but none of its compensating impartiality and good sportsmanship. He would, perhaps, have made a good Prussian officer, of the cast-iron Junker type. And in Stiegel, who had actually served in the Prussian ranks before emigrating to America, he had found a drillmaster of the same merciless mold.

Admittedly K Troop was a bit slack after several years of highly distasteful "reconstruction" work in the South. But it was still a fighting unit. More than a quarter of its personnel were veteran professional soldiers. Even the recruits coming out from the cavalry depot at Carlisle included many who had served in the Civil War, either in the Union or Confederate armies. K Troop needed only a stern, fair hand on the bridle.

Instead, the new skipper had elected to treat the troop like so many raw German peasants. He had promptly busted practically all of the non-coms—First Sergeant Cordis, of course, first of all. He had set Stiegel to sweating them out pitilessly. Nothing was ever right. He had, in short, converted the troop into a madhouse.

If the outfit had been under the immediate eye of the colonel, undoubtedly the situation would have been promptly corrected. But McAuer was three hundred miles away. Supreme at this one troop post, and with little to do save

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brood over the fate that had sent him to such a hole, Dealey only grew harder as the sullen troop inevitably fought back. He had singled out Cordis as the ring leader. After that he had made Cordis' life one continuous hell.

A born soldier, Cordis had endured it in grim silence. This swift order to assemble the regiment for an Indian campaign had seemed the break he was waiting for. But instead, it had turned out the last straw.

Coming in late, K Troop had found the regiment already in the field. Eight men had deserted on the way up. Beyond doubt, McAuer had seen at first glance that something was seriously wrong. But, with no time to straighten out the trouble, he had left the troop as camp guard, significantly ignominious assignment enough, while the rest of the command pounded off in search of the enemy.

Probably also he had given Dealey curt warning to get his troop in hand. For, with venomous fury bred almost certainly of fright, Dealey had redoubled his rawhiding of the men. And, literally at the end of his endurance, Cordis had listened when big Ryan came with his proposal to go over the hill.

"If yez don't, Neal, shure as fate ye're goin' to be killin' thot looie," Ryan argued flatly, and Cordis knew that was true. "Thin they'll hang yez, hoigh as Haman. We can steal our horses off the picket line and make it through to Dodge. There's all koinds av money to be made buffalo huntin', I hear. Or we can go on to the moines. We can dodge th' blasted redskins aisy enough. And as fer *his* iver catching us—" Ryan's snort was contempt supreme.

Yet about that the big Irishman had been wrong. For they had been caught, red-handed, not two hundred yards from camp. Perhaps others also had winded the plot, as had Teel, Sod Ryan's recruit tentmate, who had promptly attached himself to the reluctant trio. Or perhaps Dealey had simply been expecting such a break. At any rate Stiegel and a dozen of the wagon guard with their Long Toms cocked had pounced from the grass. And there had been bleak triumph in Dealey's small, shallow eyes as the prisoners were led in.

SO NOW, with a fine army record gone smash, Neal Cordis was ready to try getting away again. They were nearly finished with the packing. The first forerunners of the oncoming norther were whirling over them. The blue band in the north was towering now, and Cordis knew there was dust aplenty in it, mixing with rain or sleet.

"We'll draw straws, to see who rides the bareback mule," he proposed, and plucked blades of grass for the test. Drawing third, Ryan looked disgustedly at the short blade he had picked.

"Arrah!" he spat. "Th' dir-rty end of th' stick, as iver!" Without waiting for the rest to draw, he scrambled back up the bank to where Hunter was on guard. An instant later Cordis heard Hunter's shout and, twisting, saw Ryan scrambling over the top of the bank.

"Sod, you fool! Come back here!" he barked, but with a reckless wave the Irishman darted out of sight. Almost before Cordis could reach the bank he was back with a saddle stripped from a dead horse some twenty paces out. Rifles were spitting viciously from the brush, and there was angry whooping. Sod tumbled down beside Cordis, laughing.

"Ah, but they nivver aven shot close to me, th' butther-fingered divvils," he answered Cordis' protest. "Me split meself wide open on one of thim jughead's bare backbones! I'd rither be shot!"

Cordis let it drop. If the impulsive action had been a giveaway of the besieged troopers' intent, why doubtless the wily Comanches already had foreseen such a possibility. It would be a gamble at best anyway. But the storm might tilt the balance the right way.

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The firing had petered out, and there were no further signs of life in the thicket. Hunter twisted, looking back. "Here she comes!" he said sharply, and immediately the first roaring gust drove over them. So thick was the sweeping dust that Cordis could scarcely see.

"Go get that saddle on," he told Ryan in a half-shout as the gust slacked. "You go get ready too, Vic. All of you. I'll keep an eye out up here. Get your overcoats on, and be set to pull out the minute I come down."

"What about Gregg, here, and Vernon?" demanded Blaine. "Do we just leave them, for those dirty redskins to scalp? Or what?"

Cordis hesitated. "Carry them down and put them in the wagon," he decided. "Pile the stuff up. We can fire it when we leave. That's all we can do."

They started to obey, Blaine and Teel picking up the dead corporal, while Ryan gathered Vernon awkwardly in one huge arm. They had been good guys, the dead troopers, and comrades. With a harsh breath Vic Hunter pointed toward Stiegel.

"Him, too? He ain't even fit to burn with these fellers."

"Him, too," Cordis nodded. "He's a cavalry scalp to the Comanches just the same as the rest of us."

Hunter nodded reluctantly. Next to Cordis, he had perhaps taken the most from this dead drillmaster and his martinet master. With a sudden grin he picked up one of the discarded pairs of handcuffs and snapped it on Stiegel's wrist. "He was willing to let us die in the things," he growled.

He caught the corpse by the armpits and then paused.

"You know, Neal, exceptin' for Blaine we could sure end our trail right here. Burned bodies, with handcuffs on. They'd think it was us. And if they struck us all off as dead, that sure might help later."

Cordis did not reply. He had already thought of that. But with Johnny Blaine alive and determined to return to the command it didn't matter. Maybe their trail really would end here, Cordis thought somberly. Queer how the old code still held him. He could desert himself. Yet he could neither urge Blaine to do so, nor do anything but his best to get the youngster out of this alive.

The wind was a gale now, driving vast clouds of blinding dust. Already there was a spit of snow. The temperature was falling as though it had been dropped from a balloon. Down at the wagon they were all ready. Cordis took a last look at the thicket, and dropped swiftly down to them.

THERE had been straw in the wagon as a bed for the sick Lapp, and Hunter had covered the bodies with it. That and the heavy body of the wagon would be enough to make a soldiers' pyre. Perhaps, too, the smoke would hold the Comanches for a time since they could not see down into the deep creek bed. Cordis nodded to Ryan, and after a bit of trouble the Irishman succeeded in setting the straw alight.

"Come on!" Cordis led the way quickly, down the bed of the creek. Where the steep banks began to flatten out perhaps a quarter mile downstream, he paused for a quick final check before hitting the open. Hunter and Ryan were leading the pack mules. He spoke to them quietly.

"If we have to run for it, don't let those pack animals get you killed. Cut 'em loose, if you can't keep up otherwise. All right?"

He led the way up the bank, straight north into the teeth of the storm.

Driving at a gallop, they had gone perhaps two hundred yards, before there was a sudden, wind-drowned whooping behind them, and the *pop-pop* of firing. Glancing back, Cordis could see for an instant what looked like lashing phantoms of horsemen in the dust. With a sharp command he let out the pace to the last notch.

That was as near as the besiegers came

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to closing with the fleeing troopers. Perhaps in the swirling storm the red raiders were only too ready to call it quits and head for the warm shelter of their lodges. Perhaps they preferred to seek loot at the abandoned wagon. But they were gone. After a mile Cordis checked the killing gait down to a steady trot. For the time, at least, he was confident they had made good their escape.

It was beginning to sleet in earnest now, and so thick was the driving murk that Cordis could keep his direction only by directly facing into the wind. But that was as much blessing as handicap. Nobody, not even a Comanche, would be able to follow a trail in this, Cordis knew. Nor would there be much chance of running into other hostile bands. The broken country northward would afford plenty of places for the fugitive troopers to hole up. But before doing so they must put as much ground as possible behind them.

Which meant taking punishment aplenty, for the sleet was coming like flying shot. It grew increasingly difficult to force the horses to head into it. Veering northwestward as they struggled to steer straight, they began to run into canyons and buttes where the temptation to stop in their shelter was almost irresistible. But when at last darkness forced them to halt, they had made, Cordis judged, at least twelve miles.

He chose a camp site in a canyon, whose vertical banks cut off the wind. And presently, as a mesquite wood fire thawed the chill out of their bones, they grew more cheerful. A tarpaulin stretched out from the cliff above them cut off the drafts and reflected the warmth against their backs. Frying bacon in a mess kit, big Sod Ryan cut loose a deep-throated chuckle.

"Well, and this b'ates chasin' Injuns a moile, don't it?" he rumbled, and looked sideways at Blaine. "Or takin' th' hidin' of thot dir-rty lif'tinint! Johnny, me lad, don't tell me yer shtill thinkin' av l'avin' us and goin' back to thot son av Belial! When yez could be livin' in the lap av luxury, so to sp'ake, with us, yer frinds!"

There was more than mere raillery in the way he said it, and Blaine obviously recognized as much. Cordis started to open his mouth quickly, but closed it again without sound. Face flushed, Blaine hesitated for a long breath before he answered.

"I DON'T think any more of Dealey than you fellers do," he said slowly. "But he ain't the army. When I joined up I swore I'd serve old Uncle Sam faithful, five years no matter what." He looked at the faces about him, and his tone lifted defiantly. "Yes, and so did you guys!"

"And so you think you ought to remind us now, uh?" said Hunter, in a swift fury. "Why, you damn, preachin'—" He broke off with an exasperated rasp as Cordis dropped a quick hand on his arm.

"Easy, Vic," Cordis said softly. And then to Blaine: "And you, too, Johnny. We've made our bed, but we're not asking you to share it any longer than you have to. You'll probably have to stick with us a few days because we can't very well take you in. Trying it by yourself, you'd either get lost or gobbled. But the first chance we get we'll let you go."

He smiled, with a queer tautness. "And I guess you're right, kid, about Dealey not being the army," he added. "Don't let a bunch of fools like us persuade you different."

"Wish ye was back, do yez, Neal, with thot Dealey eatin' yer tail out?" snarled Ryan. But then, with the quickness of his race, he caught what Cordis really had meant, and nodded sympathetically.

"Shure, shure, I know," he murmured, and turned hurriedly to lift the sizzling bacon off the fire. "Arrah, forget it! Let's ate, drink and be merry, for who knows? Tomorrow th' domn Injuns may have foive more scalps."

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For a few minutes he carried them along with his light-hearted banter, and the hot food also helped. Yet the brief argument had dropped a pall over the camp. Each man seemed to withdraw into his own somber thoughts—Hunter flatly sullen, Blaine still faintly defiant, Ryan's jesting forced. The recruit, Teel, laughed loudly at the Irishman's sallies, but his eyes were wide and scared. He kept glancing wistfully at Blaine, and watching him, Cordis knew what he was thinking.

To be even in Blaine's boots, with a chance at least to go back, clean. No deserter— Cordis looked away, his mouth closing so tightly its line was like the scar of an old wound. Stubbornly he was still defending his own personal choice. Yet he knew also he had been a fool; and a double, criminal fool to let this raw, green boy desert with him.

He shrugged it away, gruffly apportioning the guard to cover the night. One man for each two hour trick would be enough, he judged. In this storm, there was scarcely need for any watch at all, but the disciplined habits of military security were strong within him. He gave himself the dog watch, two to four, when it is hardest for a man to stay awake. And when they had rolled into their blankets, he lay a long time thinking.

They had never formally chosen him leader. And yet by their tacit, unquestioning obedience they had made him such. Even Blaine, who had been ready to shoot it out with Hunter, had immediately obeyed Cordis. Hunter and Ryan, perhaps, were in the grip of old habit, remembering when Cordis had been top cutter. But Blaine and Teel, much newer to the troop, had never known him as anything save a private. Just the same, they had handed him the job with its responsibilities. And he had accepted it.

Intuitively, he knew if he let them alone, the others in time would talk Johnny Blaine into throwing in with them. Blaine was in an awkward fix, where he must listen. And Ryan particularly could be wonderfully persuasive when he wished. All Cordis need do was keep still.

Without Blaine to reveal that the deserters were still alive, and even to tell which way they had headed, the searchers finding that burned wagon would probably report the whole detachment wiped out. The idea that the handcuffed unarmed prisoners alone could have escaped would seem fantastic. Failure to find all the bodies was a commonplace of Indian fighting. To be listed as missing after an Indian scrap meant just the same as dead. And for dead men reward hunters do not look.

So much added safety, to be purchased by suborning only one more trooper's faithlessness. One more offense, helping make a rat out of one more boy soldier. And yet how he could help—the green kid whom Cordis could have kept out of this.

Overhead the storm marched endlessly, with weird cadences like mocking laughter. It was an hour before Cordis at last went to sleep.

SOMETIME toward morning the storm blew itself out. Dawn was bitterly cold, and cheerless. There were two inches of sleet on the ground but at least no more was falling, and the murderous wind had let up. As he sipped his coffee, Cordis studied the north with narrowed eyes.

"Well, we're not very likely to run into more Indians today, at any rate," he said wryly, and got to his feet. "Come on, you snowbirds, pack up. We're takin' wing."

They grinned at him and moved to obey. "Snowbird" fitted them this morning in more ways than one. It was the term the army derisively applied to the hundreds of bob-tail vagrants who would enlist each fall at the posts all up and down this frontier. And then after a warm winter in barracks they would desert in the spring, if possible with a mount and arms also supplied by a generous government. At least, mused Cordis, he and his mates weren't exactly being original in their defection.

When they moved out, he sent Vic

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Hunter ahead to peer, Indian fashion, over each crest before the following party skylined itself. This rolling broken prairie along the east wall of the Staked Plains was the natural home of the Comanches and Kiowas the troops were trying to herd back to their Indian Territory reservations. The fugitive villages might be in it most anywhere. War parties scarcely would be on the move in such weather. But cavalry columns certainly might be. And Cordis didn't care to bump into either troopers or Comanches.

The hard-frozen levels were blown practically clear of snow, and they made good time. Nor did they leave much trail to follow, if anyone should chance on their track, which wasn't likely. Pushing hard, they made better than fifty miles during the day. In late afternoon they began to find buffalo in the sheltered hollows, and they shot one and butchered out the hump. That night they had buffalo steak. Stuffed to repletion, everyone was in high good humor.

The next day, with the swift vagary of Texas weather, the cold spell broke. By noon it was almost balmy. When they stopped for dinner, they had all stripped out of their overcoats. As they ate, Cordis kept thinking about Johnny Blaine. And finally, Sod Ryan's casual question gave him the opening he wanted.

"Neal, ye got any good idea jist where we are?" Ryan asked. Cordis nodded, swallowing to clear his throat.

"I think we're not far from the Pease River now," he answered slowly and caught Blaine's eye before he twisted to stare westward. Out there against the sky the great ragged escarpment of the Staked Plains lifted like a wall, extending out of sight, north and south. Raising his hand, Cordis pointed.

"And about forty miles or so due west yonder is the supply camp, I figure," he added, and looked significantly at Blaine again. "This is as close as we'll get, Johnny. A man could probably make it by night if he pushed along. It's not very likely any Indians will be hanging around close where cavalry columns are moving in and out. So if you're still planning on quitting us—"

"Who said he was?" cut in Hunter in a flat snarl. Frowning dubiously, Johnny Blaine stared to the west, and started to open his mouth. But before he could say anything Sod Ryan took up in a softly reproachful murmur.

"Shure and ye wouldn't be turnin' Johnny out all by himself, would yez, Neal? For shame! Why, aven if the Injuns didn't gobble him a lone mon would get lost in no toime out there. Why thim Staked Plains are three hundred moiles long, desert, sand, gravel, canyons, nixt to no wather. And ye're expictin' th' boy to foind a pinpoint in thot! Johnny, ye'd be crazy to try it!"

Cordis flushed, then shut his lips tight. There was nothing more he could say. After all, there was bleak truth in Ryan's words. And he, Cordis, was not Blaine's nurse. Ryan had been talking to the youngster, Cordis knew, before this. For Johnny Blaine's answer at last was halting, different.

"I don't know whether I could make it or not, Sarge." Johnny Blaine laughed nervously, and shrugged. "Don't know that I even want to, now. This—this ain't so bad now, is it?"

"That's talkin'," approved Hunter, with a savage grin. "You don't fall for the recruitin' sergeant's guff any more, huh, Johnny?" He glanced edgewise at Cordis, and in cold fury Neal got to his feet.

"Vic, if you or Ryan want to start something with me, why pitch in," he invited. They twisted uneasily, without response. "I'm not forgetting we've still got more than two hundred miles of hostile Indian country in front of us before we hit the Kansas settlements," he drove on. "You two and me, we know what we're bucking. But you, Johnny, when you don't have to go on with this—"

His eye caught Joe Teel's twitching face, and he choked.

"All right, if everybody's finished, let's get going," he muttered, and swung

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toward his horse. In abashed silence, they mounted with him. Hunter turned inquiringly, and at Cordis' nod, trotted out to the front again. For an instant, as the others moved off, Johnny Blaine sat motionless, staring westward. But then with an uncertain shrug he also followed, and Cordis' mouth tightened.

III

THE mesquite began to grow more stunted now, and to give way more and more to open, rolling prairie. But there were still patches of cover, and as far as he could Cordis steered close to them. With this better weather the war parties would be on the move again, he knew. And now the five troopers were heading right into the area where the Indians were supposed to be. So he rode with increasing wariness.

After today, certainly, Cordis decided, they must travel only at night, hiding and resting during the daytime. They could be spotted entirely too easily by day. Especially at this time of year when the grass was brown, a moving object could be detected and recognized at amazingly long distances in the clear air of these plains. By night, they might escape enemies, even though surprised. But to be jumped again by Indians in the daytime, Cordis knew, would be fatal.

It must have been about three o'clock when he saw Hunter whirl suddenly back from the crest of a low, mesquite motted ridge ahead. The big trooper was lifting his carbine above his head. "Halt!" Cordis' own hand jerked up instantly, for Hunter was signaling "Enemies in sight." Deadly tense, the little party waited.

But the danger was not immediate, evidently, for now Hunter had stopped and was beckoning violently. He was trying to hurry the party into the cover of that mesquite patch, Cordis realized swiftly. With a sharp word to his companions, he drove forward on the lope.

"Come up here and take a look," Hunter answered his sharp question as they pulled to a halt in the edge of the thicket. "Better leave the horses here under cover. That mesquite on top's mighty thin."

Nodding, Cordis swung down, handing the reins to Teel. Carbine in hand, he followed Hunter up the slope. Just back of the crest, Hunter squatted abruptly, pushed aside a limb and pointed.

"Look yonder. Make you homesick?"

Ahead was a broad, flat valley, covered only with dead grass. Away off to the left, the wall of the Staked Plains curved sharply back in a great embayment. Out there on the flat to the left front was a blue cavalry outfit, about twenty troopers in column of twos.

They were perhaps a mile and a half away, but in the crystal sunlight Cordis recognized them instantly. They were part of his own troop.

"Scouting party, I reckon," grunted Hunter at his elbow. "There's that cursed Dealey leadin' them. And look away over yonder. See it?"

Northwest, on over the rim of the Staked Plain was a long, high cloud of dust. Moving buffalo also kick up dust, but not like that, Cordis knew. Underneath that betraying streak were more blue horsemen, although he could not see them.

"Must be the whole regiment," he muttered, half to himself, and looked again at the scout party, with narrowing eyes. They were moving diagonally to cross his front, east by north. It must be at least five miles over to that invisible column, he judged. And since this party was probably far out to cover the flank, why doubtless the regiment was moving the same direction, east and north.

There was a guarded call from behind and Cordis twisted to see Ryan staring curiously up toward him. He motioned to them to leave the horses with Teel and come on up. As they squatted down and peered through the limbs, he heard the Irishman's amazed grunt, and then his oath of recognition.

"Howly saints! 'Tis our own throop,

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ain't it! Or th' wor-r-st part av ut, anyways. Now what do we do, Neal?"

"Lie doggo here, till they go on by. And be thankful they're crossing in front of us where they won't cut our trail, instead of behind where they would." Cordis looked at the silent Blaine, and spoke again, with a sudden curtness.

"Look over northwest. See that dust streak, Johnny. That's the regiment. You couldn't miss it. Once these babies get on by, you're going to head for that streak. You can tell 'em you just got lost. Or, anything you want to."

"But he ain't—" began Hunter sharply, and broke off. Cordis had taken a couple of crouching steps back down the slope where he wouldn't be seen when he straightened. His right hand was on his hip: and also against the butt of that awkward, army holstered revolver.

"Yeah, I reckon he is, Vic," he said, very quietly. "We got one kid in this already, and that's enough."

There was a tense silence before finally Ryan spoke. "Well, at thot, you could do wor-rse Johnny. With the auld mon kapin' an eye on it, the throop's goin' to improve plinty! Ye weren't takin' th' punishmint anyways. Not a bad place, th' ar-rmy. Betther to be chasin' Comanches thin bein' chased by the murtherin' divvils, shure!"

"But, you said—" began Blaine uncertainly, and the Irishman cut him short with a chuckle.

"Shure and I did," he agreed cheerfully. "Thinkin' av me own skin. Not yours. But ye can till thim a cock and bull story av how we was all kilt and that'll do jist as well. Or betther!"

"You can tell them the truth, and save yourself a lot of trouble," amended Cordis harshly. "It won't make any difference. They got more important business on hand right now than chasin' four deserters. Anyhow, whether you want to or not you're going."

HE turned to take another look at the detachment in front. They were moving swiftly away now at a spanking trot, clear past. Over to the right, perhaps two miles away, he could see broken wooded ground toward which they were heading. That dust cloud marking the regimental column was also moving away, but nearing the edge of the high plain. Cordis judged it would break down over the rim just about behind the great blue butte yonder, still out of sight.

With soldiers and Indians both in front of him he'd have to be more wary than ever, he thought grimly, as he started to turn. He heard Sod Ryan's choking, dismayed cry, and completed his turn in a whirl.

Down there to the south, a wild horseman came over the prairie swell. As Cordis saw him, here came another, and another. There were thirty or forty of them in sight before he could draw a breath. They were driving at a gallop, following his own hot trail, Cordis knew instantly. War party!

"If we ain't between the divvil and the dape blue sea now!" he heard the Irishman's aghast exclamation as he leaped past the big man. "Get to the horses!" Cordis flung the command out of the side of his mouth. "Jump! Keep down!" They were all sprinting now, while below Joe Teel was calling out in stammering alarm.

As yet, probably, the oncoming Comanches had not sighted their prey, Cordis thought as he ran. But they would in another minute or so. The leafless mesquite would be scant concealment at close range, and no protection at all for the horses. To stay here and fight was simply out of the question.

At the first rush, those Indians would either stampede or shoot down horses and pin the desperate party at the center of a whirling circle of death. Then, if the roar of the battle didn't bring that blue detachment pounding to investigate, it would be just a matter of dying as hard as possible. Such luck as the escape in that norther would not come twice. If the scouting detachment did come to the rescue, why that would mean, at the best, only recapture and prison.

But there was a chance the two hazards

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could be played against each other, and life and liberty won in the game. With a whirling leap, Cordis went into his saddle, crackling the order.

"Come on, quick! Mount and ride for it! Lie flat as you can on your horses' necks. Let's go!"

He led the way straight for the top of the ridge in a flat rush.

Undoubtedly the movement would betray them to those huntsmen behind, Cordis knew, but that couldn't be helped. Time was the essential now, every second vital. As they tore through the thorned limbs on the crest he looked back, and although he couldn't hear the sudden, savage yelling, he could imagine it. Those Comanches had seen their prey.

Pushing as fast as his horse could run, he broke down the slope and into the open a good three hundred yards before he pulled down just enough to bring him abreast of Johnny Blaine.

"You, Johnny," he said, "Here's where you go on your own high lonesome. When we turn, you keep goin' straight ahead. Burn the breeze for the regiment yonder and tell the colonel or whoever's in command just what's happening back here. You get it? Tell him we kidnaped you if you want to, but tell him here's the Indians he's lookin' for. It'll help us plenty."

"But, what you—" gasped Johnny bewilderedly, only to have Cordis cut him short.

"Nev' mind that! Obey orders! We're not going to fight 'em, and we're not going to get caught either. I hope. All right now!"

He let out his horse and his voice together. "The rest of you fellers! We're doublin' east now, for those brakes! Follow me!" He whirled right. slapping his free hand toward his revolver as Johnny Blaine made a half-move to swing with them.

Perhaps it was only Johnny's horse trying to keep with the bunch for the youngster straightened him out. "G-goodbye, then, fellers! Good luck!" his stammering farewell came back to them. He was going like a scared rabbit, straight for that streak of dust that now was coming down over the rim of the Staked Plain. Pounding along now abreast Ryan, Cordis saw the Irishman's understanding grin.

"Runnin' th' bye off and thryin' ourselves to squ'aze between th' throop and th' Injuns, uh?" Ryan laughed excitedly. "Begad, and Oi hope it worruks!"

Cordis didn't answer. It was too difficult to talk against the sweep and rush of their headlong flight. He was trying to watch three ways at once anyhow, back toward the crest, ahead and to the left where that scout detail was now a dark blur against the brown grass. It was too far away for the naked eye to pick out details. But evidently it was halted. Certainly those keen-visioned troopers wouldn't fail to spot racing horsemen, even in their rear.

TWISTING about, Cordis saw that Blaine was a good quarter of a mile on his way now. But still no wild feathered heads were popping above the crest to the south. Hadn't those Indians really seen their fleeing quarry after all, or were they shying cautiously, losing time, fearing a trap? Cordis didn't know but he suspected he'd soon find out.

"Now they see us!" Hunter pointed north with a sudden shout. "Look. They're comin' about. Swingin' to head us off! Now we're for it, boys!"

He slashed home with his spurs, to get an extra notch of speed out of his mount. With a sharp caution Cordis checked him.

"Hold that, Hunter! This thing may last for miles, remember. We don't dare pump the animals out this soon. Better let me set the pace." He surged ahead, and deliberately checked down to a steady gallop.

The temptation to make a dash for it was almost irresistible, but Cordis held himself in. He had two men on mules to think about, Sod Ryan and Teel. Slower animals than the horses, those two mules, although more hardy. And there were also the two pack mules, not vitally necessary save as possible spare mounts, but carrying the food and shelter tarps. The am-

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munition was all in the belts, blouses and saddle pockets of the men, but Cordis didn't want to lose anything unless he had to.

To get badly strung out or to wind the animals at this stage of the game, he knew would probably be disastrous. His plan was beginning to work out like a problem in mathematics. Three forces, or two anyhow, were driving for an imaginary point somewhere over there in that broken ground about due east. Dealey and the scout party were racing southeast from the north, Cordis and his mates were on the middle line, and coming from the southwest—Cordis twisted again to stare.

Those Comanches must be coming over there. There was still not a sign of them on the ridge, but they must be lashing east, behind its cover. Surely they wouldn't be wasting all this time on that deserted thicket, or quitting the chase because of a few troopers, still a couple of miles away. Nevertheless, there in their failure to appear was another tugging temptation that grew with every flying stride, the impulse to veer southward.

Driving furiously on their converging paths, the two parties of troopers were much nearer together now. Cordis speeded the pace. Whipping a glance back, he saw that Blaine was no more than a receding dot, safely out of all this now, and lucky. For it was going to be close; much closer than Cordis had anticipated.

Knowing that Dealey would certainly be carrying field glasses, he had expected swift recognition and pursuit. Four supposed prisoners, scampering under his very nose. Dealey would react to that like a bull to a red flag. Yet even so, Cordis had expected the officer to display some caution, some sense.

He had gambled on the Comanches putting in at least a momentary appearance. But, even though they hadn't thus far, still Dealey should be divining their presence from the very actions of the four blue fugitives. Why in the name of mud would deserters be fleeing crazily like this right past the jaws of would-be captors, were there not even more deadly peril behind? Yet the bullheaded Dealey seemed to have no inkling of the real danger.

A GOOD ten yards in front of his men, he was spurring as fast as his blooded horse could run. Inevitably his command was stringing out confusedly behind him, clear out of hand.

"Arrah, ye blitherin' fools!" Sod Ryan lifted in his saddle with a scream, waving wildly to the oncoming troopers. "Injuns! Injuns!" He pointed to the ridge, fought to convey by gestures the warning his voice could not carry across the intervening space. "Oh, ye domn, dumb idjits!" He twisted on Cordis with a despairing snarl.

"They're goin' to overhaul us, Neal! They'll catch these mules in a twinklin'. There's no sign av thim Injuns, mebbe they've stopped. We're got to chance it—" He started to veer to the right. With a furious plunge, Cordis shouldered him back.

"Straight ahead I said, Ryan! Give it all you've got! Cut that pack mule loose, Teel, and ride! We get out of here east or we don't get out."

Beneath the roar of hoofs, Cordis heard the smash of a shot, the unmistakable, flat bang of one of those rim-fire cavalry carbines. He saw the flash of Dealey's pistol, as he turned The pursuit was firing now, senselessly. Six or seven hundred yards still separated the two parties. But abruptly Cordis realized he was having to look back over his shoulder to see.

Holding straight to his course, due east along the base of that low ridge, he was now pulling out in front of the pursuing detachment. They had failed to head him off. But also they were outracing him. If they could hold this mad pace, in a mile more the chase would be over.

Cordis' own party was going its top gait, perhaps with more wind left than the pursuit, but certainly less speed. The broken ground toward which they were

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racing was now not a quarter mile ahead, but plainly there was no refuge there. All right for a stand-off fight, those bare cross swells, or cover from distant eyes. But hounds this hot at heel would never be shaken off. As he twisted to look at that ridgetop to the right again, Cordis knew his gamble was at its desperate crux.

He could not fight these blue troopers behind, nor could he lead them slam bang into a certain death trap. But, at the same time, neither was he their nurse. They were supposed to have some savvy of their own—Dealey, a commissioned officer, particularly. But the way the bull fool was acting . . .

Was that a thin film of dust lifting above the top of the long ridge? With the wind of his own headlong pace tearing at his eyes, Cordis couldn't be sure. But he thought it was. Plunging hooves wouldn't lift nearly as much dust from this prairie sod, of course, as from the bare gravel back up there atop the Staked Plain. Yet racing death, plunging up from the southwest, behind that covering swell . . .

The detachment was dead astern now, still closing in. Cordis cursed as he looked back. He oughtn't to care what happened to them, but somehow he did. They were strung out a quarter of a mile, all organization gone, all cohesion. Shouting, as vainly as Ryan had shouted, he pointed south toward that ridgetop, and got a spurt of pistol flame back in answer.

"Hunter, blast ye! Don't l'ave us!" he heard Sod Ryan's gasping plea, and, jerking around, saw that the big trooper was pulling away on his faster horse. "Hunter!" Cordis roared at him, and clamped his mouth tight shut. He didn't have any right to try to keep Hunter from escaping, he was thinking, in a sudden, chill detachment. Hunter on his big horse, and Cordis too, could probably cut loose and make it. It wouldn't help Ryan and Teel any to stay and be captured with them. But Cordis knew he was going to stay.

"Spur him, kid!" he raged at Teel, and slashed furiously at the madly pounding mule with his free hand. That jughead was probably running faster now than ever before in its life, he thought, still with that queer feeling of utter impersonality. Through a sort of haze he saw the recruit's gray face as Teel looked back, saw the horrified emotion explode across those strained features.

"A-ah!" It was like an electric shock. The command was screaming from Cordis' lips even before he looked back. He knew what he would see. He had won the gamble, had spun free. And now the pursuers, wolf pack and hounds, were clashing together.

"To the left! Left, everybody, you hear, Hunter? North, quick! Keep together!" The first low, covering cross swell was beneath their plunging hooves. In a confused pack, the free mules galloping with them, they swung northward together.

Back there, eight hundred yards or so to the southwest, the top of the long ridge was fairly sprouting naked whooping horsemen. The blue detachment below was belatedly alive to its peril now. Individual troopers were whirling as the fugitives had whirled—northward. All strung out as the command was, there was nothing else to do. Where Cordis had won for his group eight hundred yards of leeway, Dealey had three hundred or less; and a surprise attack in murderous force, lashing home.

"Domn him, we tried to warn him!" Ryan panted harshly at Cordis' side. "Come on, byes! Let him get himself out of thot, th' stupid fool!" Yet, automatically, he too, like the others, checked the pace.

With that half mile separating them from the grim drama out there, they were no more than detached spectators now. The spell of it gripped them. Neither Indians nor troopers were paying them any further attention. The low cross-swell they were on was carrying them northeast, and away from the fight now, for the scouting party was falling back northwestward. They had only to drop over

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the east side of the swell and speed away.

But they didn't. Presently they were almost at a complete halt, all watching, in a sort of gray fascination.

IV

IT WASN'T a complete rout. Dealey had some sense, and there had been a file closer, tailing that strung-out line. Sergeant Morey, probably, Cordis guessed; a good soldier, for all his bootlicking of the troop commander. The fleeing blue line had crowded in on its own center, achieving some semblance of cohesion again. It stopped suddenly, and men swung down out of their saddles. Carbines played a blast of fire on the front of the pursuing wave, and that wave recoiled.

"He better watch his step." Vic Hunter muttered. "They'll outflank— Great heavens, look! There's more of 'em comin' over the ridge. Hundreds of 'em!"

Cordis' breath caught in an agonized rasp. "Come on," he shouted. "We got to run!" He spun to lead out of sight, down the slope east. But he hadn't gone thirty paces before he was stopped again, looking back.

To linger here even a minute longer was sheer insanity and he knew it. But he couldn't leave. He was held tight. Something even stronger than the furious instinct for self preservation was chaining him, holding him by invisible bonds to that struggling blue group out yonder. That was his troop, men he had soldiered with. He had helped get them into this.

He had done it. His mind fought frantically against the fact, mustering excuse after excuse. A branded deserter, he could neither have been expected to stand still and let the Comanches kill him, nor to run squarely into the arms of would-be captors, could he? As plainly as he could, he had tried to warn the detachment. Was it his fault? Maybe not. But just the same, because they had seen him, there they were.

Cordis had estimated the pursuing war party at not over forty or fifty, a strength twenty troopers should be able to withstand easily. But in sight now were more than two hundred warriors, and still more coming. He had expected Dealey to use at least a little caution and judgment.

Gripped by indecision or terror, Dealey was hesitating in the very instant where, of all times, hesitation was fatal. A screaming, red line of battle was lapping about him. He should already have made his decision, either to ride for it in a running fight, or to light down for a desperate stand-off. But he had half his men dismounted, and the other half still in their saddles, milling confusedly.

"And the cuss ain't even shakin' loose anybody to go tell the colonel!" Then Vic Hunter cursed savagely. For Dealey was doing what he should have done lightning fast without stopping, or not at all.

The dismounted troopers were scrambling crazily for their saddles again. Most of them were, rather. One or two didn't get up, and there were men and horses down behind them as well. Yet, still compact at least, the detachment broke suddenly northeast. Men were shooting from their saddles. They were coming now almost directly toward the spot where Cordis stood, trying desperately to reach the higher ground. Trying, just about two minutes too late.

At that, they made a good two hundred yards or more before they stopped again. They had to stop, this time. It was obvious scarcely a man was going to live to reach the ridge. They hit the grass, and at the blaze of their carbines, the bunched, screaming pursuit fanned out right and left like powder smoke from the mouth of a cannon.

"Come on, you sons!" Afterward, Cordis supposed he must have said that. He wouldn't be sure. He remembered only the hoarse croak. "Come on!" But he knew he was moving.

Just one place for a fighting man now. Deserter or not, Cordis was answering.

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The others were moving with him, he knew; even one of the loose pack animals. He reached automatically to catch the snapping lead rope. Four hundred yards or more to go to reach that blue circle, and an extra mount, even a mule, might come in handy. He saw Joe Teel's white, staring face right beside him, and he had an impulse to tell the boy to go back, to circle and get to the regiment.

But, recruit or not, Teel was a trooper. The makings of one anyway. He was scared, but he was coming. Ten to one odds out there. One more carbine would count, some. Cordis raised himself in his stirrups.

"Keep together now! Gallop! March!" They were charging down the slope, as fast as the mules could run.

THEY made perhaps a hundred yards before they were seen. Spinning out right and left, the Comanche battle line lost a little time dropping back, before its wings lapped forward. Those cavalry carbines in the center were deadly up to five or six hundred yards, and it was not the tactics of these wild horsemen to take needless risk. But now they were on three sides of the trapped command, and the wings were racing to close the circle.

Through that narrowing gap, Cordis was driving as straight and fast as he had just fled from these same now-beleaguered troopers. He had no time to muse on the irony of that. But, strange how much a man could think and see and do in a minute.

Yet Cordis remembered looking to the northeast and noting coldly that the dust streak of the column had vanished. Would Blaine find it, he wondered? The lances of the charging warriors, right and left, were like darting tongues of bright flame. The lead mule staggered, went to his knees as a bullet hit him, and Cordis cut him loose.

Those blurs were arrows. Cordis had his pistol free now, and was firing. Ten feet in front of him, he saw a war arrow drive suddenly clear through Vic Hunter's breast, saw him reel and clutch drunkenly at his saddle. Death in that yard-long bolt, Cordis knew instantly. And, somehow mocking, that Hunter who had fought so savagely for his freedom and won should now die trying as furiously to rejoin his captors.

There were lance points jerking within thirty yards. Cordis shot a howling brave out of his buffalo hide saddle. He heard Joe Teel's choking cry, and twisted to tally another reckless warrior who was driving in. After that the Comanches were not quite so eager to close.

The group was inside the circle. Thirty feet from that desperate, blue nucleus, Hunter pitched limply from his saddle, and Cordis knew he was gone. No time to stop. He drove on, leaped down at a break in the defense line, swung his pistol against his horse's forelock and fired.

It hurt almost as much to shoot that faithful beast as it had to see Vic Hunter die, and not even pause to aid him. But that too was war. The horse's body meant cover. There wasn't a sprig of protection on this bare flat, save for the carcasses of their mounts the troopers had killed. Men were trying frantically to dig with knives, picket pins, bare hands. But there wasn't much time for that, either; or for anything save a furious burning of powder to beat back the whirling attack that was pounding, pounding like the waves of an angry sea.

"So you got us into this, and then had to join us—eh, deserter!" Cordis knew the voice even before he turned. It was Dealey, a trickle of blood running down from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes like those of a madman.

But at least, and whatever his other faults, he wasn't scared. He was standing bolt upright, with bullets kicking all about him. He lifted his revolver and fired at an in-driving warrior as he spoke. The smoking muzzle flicked down, and for one bad instant, Cordis wondered.

"Yes sir, we came in," he said crisply

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as the pistol swung by. Ryan and Teel had already found places in the ragged, sprawling defense ring, he saw. He flung himself flat behind the body of his horse, unslinging his carbine and thrusting the muzzle across the quiet neck.

There were just thirteen men left in the detachment, his quick glance had told him. So even three more rifles was a weighty addition. Whatever Dealey's reaction, the quick grins some of those other faces had given Cordis told him plainly enough what the men thought. He caught an incoming rider across his sights, and dropped the pony. For a moment, then, until his carbine was empty, his mind was concentrated only on those targets.

The very devil to hit, these Quahada Comanches, for probably never were there better horsemen, or more disturbing, irregular fighters. Their spinning line of battle was a great circle, out there about six or seven hundred yards, just beyond effective range of the Spencers. But it wasn't a simple wheel, in which each warrior monotonously galloped round and round the entire circle. It was more like a cloud of bees, swarming about a hive. Each horseman whirled in small individual circles, right or left, in or out, of his own volition.

To deliver his fire, he came spinning in toward the center, perhaps with only a hand showing, or a moccasined foot, as he clung to the side of his horse. One, a dozen, or fifty warriors might be whirling in from any point of the circle, any second. If you didn't smash the charge promptly with straight-placed lead, it might drive right on in, as fast as horses could run. While you were stopping it, here came the other side of the circle in the same trick.

ONLY the fact that these Comanches were poorly armed, Cordis knew, was saving the detachment from certain extermination. Or, from swift extermination, at any rate, for unless that regimental column came quickly, the end was plain and inevitable. Sixteen—fifteen now—could not hold off two hundred and fifty or more very long, particularly with no more cover than this. For if there were bows and lances out there, why there were also Sharps and Winchesters, and even Long Tom Springfields, captured from some luckless infantry outfit. Presently that flaming wheel would vomit a charge that couldn't be stopped. . . .

He flopped over on his side to reload the long, clumsy magazine that had to be taken clear out and then reinserted in the butt stock of the Spencer. From nowhere came a squirming, blue body to light all asprawl beside him. It was Sergeant Morey, Cordis saw, with a chew in his mouth and grinning, despite the fact that an arrow was sticking in the back of his right shoulder.

"Pull the durn thing out, will you?" he appealed, making clumsy efforts to reach the feathered shaft himself. "It's just ticked into the meat. Red devils is shootin' 'em way up into the air and down on us."

With an effort Cordis complied. Morey wriggled his shoulder gingerly, then shrugged. "Don't feel like it's bleedin' much," he commented. "I'll slap this chaw of tobacco on it, if it does. Say, Ryan says you fellers come in when you could of got clean away!"

"Yeah." Cordis levered a cartridge into the chamber and turned back to his rampart. The sergeant turned his head to spit, and crawled closer.

"Then you are crazy," he pronounced dispassionately. "Whyn't you keep right on runnin'? You wasn't out huntin' no Indians, was you?"

"Was you out huntin' deserters?" countered Cordis, and Morey grinned.

"Well, no," he admitted. "But it kind of looks like you sure helped us find what we was lookin' for, don't it? Hell, I tried to tell the lootenant, when you fellers busted out, runnin' so crazy like—"

He broke off, glancing back across the ring. Twisting to look with him, Cordis saw for the first time that Dealey was

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down. Apparently he was badly hit, for he lay limp and still. His blouse was ripped open, and across his breast was a blood-soaked bandage.

"Dyin', I think," said Morey grimly. "He wouldn't stay down."

A fragment from that reeling circle of death came screaming in at them, and both men whirled to the defense. "So I'm in command now, looks like," went on Morey as the wild riders plus a couple of emptied saddles broke back. "Don't you durn deserters run off again while my back's turned, will you?"

The wry mirth died out of his eyes, as he glanced about the taut blue ring. "They're sure whittlin' us down to size fast," he muttered. "And with that wind in the north, too. The whole regiment's up north yonder, somewheres. But if they don't hear the firin', I reckon it's just goin' to be too bad."

"There's a good chance they're already coming," Cordis told him. "I sent a man to let them know what was happening when this first started. He likely got there. Or will."

"You, what!" Morey exploded amazedly. "Sent a deserter in to— Now I know you're loco!" But there was a new hope in his eyes when Cordis explained.

"The boys will be right glad to know that if Ryan or Teel ain't told them," he said. "Dealey never thought to do it. I'll send Teel over here with you."

He squirmed away, and Cordis looked swiftly to his revolver also, before settling back to his task. What Morey had said was bleak truth, he knew. Furious though it was, this attack was still merely the build-up for the fury to come.

Certainly the Indians must know that big column was up north. From his prone position, Cordis couldn't see more than about a half mile northward, a gentle roll of the prairie limiting his view there. But the mounted Comanches undoubtedly could see for miles. If their bloody business here wasn't finished before that column hove in sight, why when it did show up red hades would explode.

JOE TEEL came crawling, and Cordis gave him a grin. "Better start diggin' in, kid," he shouted, and motioned.

He turned back, while Teel fell to with a picket pin and his bare hands. The recruit was taking it like a veteran now, excited, yet perfectly steady. He leaned close to shout a question.

"They sure yell horrid, don't they? Say, what's them white flashes?"

"Mirrors," Cordis told him. "That's the way they pass commands up and down the line. They're gettin' ready to try something, looks like."

Fresh warriors and fresh ponies were feeding into that fluid battle line, and Cordis stiffened with a grim wonder that turned to certainty. There must be close to three hundred warriors out there, he guessed. The whole fighting strength of one of the big bands the troops were seeking. Warriors by the dozens were changing mounts now, as naked, bronze youngsters brought up led horses on the run. The strength of the line was flowing around to the northwest. And yet there was never a bunch to shoot into, hardly ever even two warriors together.

Swiftly, inevitably it was coming now, Cordis knew, the climax, the supreme test, and more than likely, the end. Perhaps away up there to the north the blue column could already be seen by the Comanches, for they were hurrying. The hideous yelling was building up.

"Got everything loaded?" Cordis jerked sharply toward the recruit. "Never mind that digging, kid. It's the other side going to catch it. Now when they come in, shoot at the leader, that's the way to cut the heart out of an Indian charge. Oh yeah, and don't forget to save yourself back one bullet in your pistol, just in case."

"You mean—"

"Yeah." Cordis nodded. "Don't pay to be taken alive by these red brothers. But we're not going to be, uh, soldier?"

"Cease firing! Cease firing!" That was Morey, barking command. "Everybody, load up! They're gettin' set to come at

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us. Now, hold your fire 'til I give the word. Everybody set?"

There was a murmur from the blue islet that could be heard even through the scream and roar of that surrounding circle. Still unbroken, that circle, though tenuously thin now on all but one side. Still with warriors spinning wildly in to deliver their fire and retire. But the strength to the north was giveaway enough of the gathering wrath to come.

Magnificent, that barbaric array, Cordis realized suddenly, with a return of that chill feeling of utter detachment. It was like a great storm cloud, tipped with the jagged lightning of the lance points. Men and ponies alike were splashed with rich color, red and vermilion and ochre and the ominous black of the warpaint. Scalps jerked from bridles, war-bonnets fluttered, and the brass and silver ornaments caught the sunlight. The very flower of the fighting men of the plains, these Quahadas. A great chief whirled out in front.

"E-o-ya-ya-hoo-o!" Here they came!

Seven hundred yards. Six hundred. Five hundred! Still no word of command from Morey. With a sudden snarl of understanding, Cordis surged to his feet.

It was one of those tremendous trifles which make or break. Morey couldn't talk. At the last second he had been hit by a stray bullet. The detachment was leaderless, just at the instant when command was life or death.

"Now!" Cordis cut loose a bellowing roar. "Let 'em have it! Let 'em—" The roaring smash of the carbines drowned him out. Cordis whipped up his own stubby weapon, shooting as fast as he could lever at that great leader.

Four hundred yards. Three hundred. Two hundred. The charge was still coming, a thundering deluge. One hundred. They were beginning to break a little now, warriors and horses going down in heaps, but the rest still coming. Seventy-five yards. Cordis flung away his emptied carbine and drew his pistol.

He was smiling now, a queer, crooked grimace. He didn't believe that charge was going to break. Ten to one, the maddened, screaming warriors were sweeping in. Through the blinding smoke and dust he could see the flashing hoofs of the ponies, the points of those lances. The sharp smell of burning gunpowder was in his throat. In an odd, impersonal way, he was quite happy.

He was wiping the slate clean. Going out where he belonged, fighting. No deserter . . .

Fifty yards. The front of the roaring wave faltered suddenly in the center, tried to reform. The wings were still coming, but they were veering. With a crackling yell, Cordis jerked forward.

"Let 'em have it, fellers! Let 'em have it in the middle!"

Certainly that desperate blue handful didn't hear him in the volcano of sound. Perhaps they simply sensed him standing there in the center, sensed his command. A flat volley smashed out, carbines and pistols all together. The center of the charge was blown to bits.

For one endless breath the shattered wings swirled about the blue nucleus in a flaming pinwheel. Cordis dodged a lance point and shot the naked lancer, point blank, with that last cartridge he had meant to save. That warrior must have ridden clear over the trooper circle, for his body fell just outside.

But it didn't matter. The screeching warriors were gone on past by then, racing away south as swiftly as they had come.

"Look yonder!" said somebody. Still trying dazedly to reload, Cordis turned. Over the prairie rim to the north, he saw a snapping scarlet and white cavalry guidon. And then, as he watched, a whole, blue squadron came into view, swinging out at a gallop from column into line of battle.

"Well, we wasn't gobbled," said the husky voice. "Some of us wasn't, anyhow. We sure found Injun sign!"

Cordis twisted slowly, counting. There were just eight still on their feet. Three

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or four of the prone figures, though, certainly were only wounded. Teel was still alive, and Ryan, busily engaged in bandaging a hole in his left thigh. The big Irishman caught Cordis' glance, and grined wryly.

"Bedad, and Oi bet nobody iver had to foight harder to git sint to prison!" he said. "Yonder comes the Auld Mon in per-r-son."

CORDIS would remember what the Old Man said. It was very characteristic, very dry and to the point. At the Military Academy they will still tell you that of the three great Indian fighters, Custer, Crook and McAuer, graduated there, McAuer was the smartest. A regular Scotch Indian, canny, hard and just.

"So you men were running from the Indians?" he demanded curtly, when Cordis fell silent. Stiffly at attention, Cordis nodded.

"Yes, sir." Cordis hadn't said they were running only from those Comanches. But in the army you don't correct a commanding officer.

"And you came in voluntarily, eh?" McAuer's dour eye swept the three rigid troopers. "Hm. Did you bring in all the government property you had with you, too?"

"All we could, sir." It was beginning to soak in on Cordis now, even if not on Ryan and the quivering Teel. Cordis' own hand trembled a little, as he turned and pointed.

"I even tried to bring in one of the mules, sir. That one, yonder. He got shot."

"Yes, I see." McAuer grunted, very dryly, and frowned. "There are some very serious charges lodged against you men by your troop commander," he said abruptly. "But, since Lieutenant Dealey will probably be permanently incapacitated, the surgeon tells me, even though he lives to reach the hospital—" McAuer broke off again with that bleak, probing glare.

"You intend to plead absence without leave, I suppose?" he rasped, and Cordis caught his breath. He got it now, beyond doubt. Absence without leave, a comparatively minor offense, was what deserters usually tried to plead, in lieu of the sterner charge. But with McAuer himself suggesting it . . .

"Yes, sir!" It was like a stammering echo, the way Ryan and Teel also chimed in. Perhaps they too were beginning to get it now. A very, very faint suggestion of a twinkle appeared for an instant in McAuer's eyes, before the gray ice could hide it.

"Well, under the circumstances, such a plea will have to be taken into consideration," he snapped. "You, uh, aren't planning on running off again, are you?"

"No, sir!" Once more it was a chorus.

"Better not!" McAuer tried hard, but didn't quite manage to make it a ferocious growl. "There's still lots of Indians out there. Well, report to the surgeon, Ryan. You, Cordis, and you, Teel, report back to your troop for duty, until further orders. That's all."

They saluted stiffly, and turned away. Cordis could feel his heart pounding. He looked sideways, and saw the Irishman's face was one wide, incredulous, freckled grin.

"But—what's it mean?" said Teel bewilderedly. "Report for duty! Not puttin' us under guard. I don't—"

"Company punishment, most loikely, me bye!" broke in Ryan. His voice was a queer sort of ecstatic croon. "Thirty days in the guar-r-dhouse, mebbe, or walkin' th' ring, when we git back from this campaign. Oh, he'll be makin' us pay for our fun. But the foightin' old son av a gun! Oi could kiss him!"

Teel shook his head, looked at Cordis, and started to ask something more.

"Forget it, kid. They'll be making cavalrymen out of us yet," Cordis cut him off swiftly. How could he voice that warm, utterly satisfied feeling that was in him now?

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The Rogue

By RICHARD SALE

Begin now this exciting story of a red-headed Virginian who helped to take his country from the King

IN the summer of 1781 there was a time of breathless pause in the Revolution. Howe and Cornwallis held their troops inactive, waiting to discover the next move of the rebel Washington. The future of a nation depended on the plans of that master strategist, called by the enemy the Old Fox. . . .

Riding down a highroad of Virginia, John Hamilton, the Rogue of the Shenandoah, had much to occupy his mind. By then he should have been the husband of Miss Anne Norwood—but the small matter of a duel with the bride's brother had made that impossible. For John Hamilton was devoted wholeheartedly to the Colonial cause, and the Norwoods, like his brother Titus, were Tories.

The ring of swordblades drew Hamilton from the highway. Some minutes later he was bending over a dying Colonial, while the hoofbeats of a British major's horse faded in the distance. But before the wounded man died he intrusted to John Hamilton a sealed packet, the message from Washington to Lafayette.

HAMILTON reached the inn called The Whistling Oyster only a short time before the arrival of a certain Major Caxton, the same British major who had fled from Hamilton after that roadside duel. But Hamilton's business was in the kitchen with Inn-keeper Fitzpatrick and his pretty daughter Kathie, while Caxton reported to two British noblemen in the front parlor. These were important servants of the King, and to them Caxton, an Intelligence Officer, told the story of the duel, of how a red-headed giant must now possess the sealed packet they all sought. They were talking of that when, through an open door, Caxton caught sight of the selfsame red-headed giant. . . . The plan to recover the dispatches was easily made, for La Tournada, a beautiful British spy, had just arrived at the inn.

That night John Hamilton was awakened by a woman's scream from the next room. His gallantry won him the company of a charming lady who called herself Edith Desmond—but the next morning Hamilton discovered that his clothes had been stolen—and also the dispatch for Lafayette. A moment later from his window he saw the beautiful and treacherous Edith Desmond about to enter a coach, escorted by none other than the British major John Hamilton had driven from the Colonial messenger. So, briefly clad, the rogue of the Shenandoah leaped down to intercept them, only to be knocked senseless by Caxton's gun-butt. . . .

CHAPTER VI

A ROGUE DISOWNED

IT WAS the brandy that roused John Hamilton. It coursed in his throat like white fire, and he swallowed it choking a little. Then he sat up to stare into

This story began in last week's Argosy

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the haggard red face of Joseph Kilrain Fitzpatrick who held in his hand a bottle. Dazed for the moment, and chilled to the marrow, Hamilton permitted himself another gulp, and looked around. He saw Ancil, the stable-boy, watching him stupidly. He was in the stables, the smell of them assured him that. He was on the floor in a bed of hay and some had gotten up under the nightshirt and was tickling his back. The brandy fired him with strength and warmth and he sat erect. "The coach!" he exclaimed thickly, his mouth disinclined to work right. "My Brattle Hill frog! Milady Desmond!"

"All gone, all gone," Fitzie said back. "Glory, lad, what means all this? Cavorting in a public place in your nightshirt, engaging in a duel without your pants, being struck down on the cobbles lacking shoes! Have you gone mad? What will people say? Pray that no one saw you! If your brother Titus should hear of this —what means it all?"

"I ask you that," Hamilton groaned, feeling the lump on his head with an expression of pain. "There is an egg upon my skull that no chicken laid I warrant. I ask you, Fitzie, what happened?"

"Don't ask me," Fitzie snapped. "I can't reply. I was in the kitchen with Marcel, cooking breakfast for my guests when Ancil came running and said you lay low on the cobbles. What a scandal!"

Hamilton groaned again and beckoned Ancil over. The stable boy had the face of an owl and the wit of an ostrich. "You," Hamilton said soberly. "Pull your mind together, Ancil. You say you saw it. Who did what to me? I turned to help milady out and—"

"He struck you," Ancil replied, stuttering. "He h-h-hit you on the head with his p-p-pistol!"

"Ah!" Hamilton said, coldly furious. "Then I have another item to add to my frog's score. He struck me and then?"

"Then," Ancil said, "th-th-the coach went off like th-th-the wind!"

"Which way?"

"W-w-winchester."

"Good," Hamilton said. He got to his feet and swayed a moment. "Bring me Bony, Ancil, and you, Fitzie, thank you for your aid."

Fitzie wrung his free hand and shook his head. "What now, lad? What gleam is it now in your eye? You do not intend to pursue them?"

"Of course I pursue them," Hamilton said hotly. "That frog has abducted my clothes. It is an insult. And even more than that, the frog has abducted my honor!"

"Your honor?"

"A mission, entrusted to me by a dying man. Ah, I am a fool." He didn't really believe that though. "The thought of food and wine and a lady's hand wiped out the memory of a promise. They stole some papers from me, Fitzie. I must get them back."

"But by the saints," Fitzie said, "you must first go home and see your brother! He'll ruin me if he knows I took you in and did not send you home. You must see him, John—"

"I intend to see him," Hamilton cried. "You do not expect me to ride to Winchester again in this nightshirt?"

"I do not expect you to ride to Scarsta in it," Fitzie said in horror. "Come in and get some clothes, lad. The scandal, think what people will say—"

"Be damned to people," Hamilton said. "I'll wear my own clothes or none at all." He mounted Bony, who was a sleepy lady at that hour, and rode off up Gage Street toward Scarsta, the Hamilton estate.

SAM was one of the youngest of the Hamilton slaves. He was black as midnight, twenty years of age, and endowed with a firm belief in the supernatural. Thus, when he saw the white nightshirt come riding up to the beautiful red-bricked white-columned colonial house at Scarsta, he instantly fell to his knees and began a powerful prayer. He was jerked upright almost instantly, however, by John Hamilton's firm hand.

"No ghost, Sam," Hamilton said. "Take

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Bony to the stables and rub her down and make her ready for a flying trip. And keep your mouth still. On second thought, I'll take you with me this time to remind me that I have a home. You may saddle Goshen, Sam, and provision yourself with any lucky charms you care to carry. Bring a sword, I'll get you a gun. Where is my brother?"

Sam stared at Hamilton, rolling his eyes wildly. "Lawd, Massa Jawn, yo' gwine to ketch it!"

Hamilton scowled. "Is Titus up?"

"He up, he up," Sam prattled. "He one mad gennerman, Massa Jawn. What yo' do in dat Winchester anyhow? Lawd keep yo', son, dat Massa Titus, he madder'n' bull mink in'a matin' season! Las' night late come a horseman all de way frum Winchester. He gwine in he tell yo' brother. Massa Titus, he up all night. He don't sleep atall. His face look lak thunder on de mountain. Yo' gwine to ketch it sharp!"

"Ah well," Hamilton said lightly, "who am I to spit in the eye of Destiny, eh? Mind what I told you, Sam. We leave in minutes."

Sam shook his head. "Hit's trubble. I feel hit in de marrow o' mah bones. Plenty trubble."

Hamilton looked annoyed. "If you don't want to come, stay here then."

"No, no, Massa Jawn. I go 'long wit' yo'. Yo' gwine to need Sam 'round yo' to keep de debbil from yo' shoes, sho 'nough!"

"A lot of help you'll be," Hamilton laughed. "You couldn't hit a barn with a pistol, and you'd get yourself killed on the first lunge with a sword—"

"But I t'row de blade," Sam said darkly. "Ain' no darky in dese hills can t'row de knife lak Sam Dixie t'rows it. Ain' no darky and no white man neither can split a po'k rind at twenty feet."

"Good enough," Hamilton said. "Fix the horses and be ready. If Titus is as angry as you say, I may be leaving sooner than I think."

He pushed the darky off toward the stables and then went up the steps to the house and opened the door and went in. He had some intention of making the upper floor and finding his room first so that he might put on some decent clothes and, at least, look sober, for there was brandy on his lips and the scent of it hung around him.

But he had no such luck.

He was crossing the hall to the foot of the graceful curved staircase when the voice of Titus Hamilton reached him. "John."

He turned. He looked past the hall into the living room and he saw his brother seated before the fire in a barrel chair, his face gloomy and morose and at the same time quite taut and set. Titus was smoking a pipe. He did not move. From where he sat, he commanded a view of the hall. You could not cross to the stairs without being seen. Hamilton smiled. He knew that Titus had waited several hours for this moment to catch him and that though he looked quite composed, Titus was quietly satisfied with having done it.

"Ah well," Hamilton said. "Caught in the act again." He left the hall and strode into the living-room.

"Sit down," Titus said slowly.

"The thought," replied John Hamilton lightly, "appeals to me." He stretched himself out on the lounge, facing his brother and their eyes met. John Hamilton's were insolent; Titus' dark.

THE differences between the two were instantly apparent. One was an epee, the other a saber; one a lion, the other an elephant; one a liberal, the other a reactionary; one a flash, the other a dull glow. Titus Hamilton was six years older than his brother; they did not look at all alike. Titus had the sleek plump aspect of a well-fed lord of fertile lands. He was a very large man, big without any of the physical attraction which the word usually implies. His face was broad, his hands stubby and fleshy. He spoke slowly, his voice very deep. "Well, John?"

"Quite well, thank you," Hamilton said with ease. "You must excuse my costume.

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The truth of the matter is some thief has done away with my clothes."

"Thief?" Titus rumbled, unappeased.

"A chap named Caxton," Hamilton said. "Stole my things at the Whistling Oyster. They called him major. I have a score with that fellow."

"Caxton?" Titus rose to his feet and looked disturbed. "You young fool, what are you into now? Major Caxton is one of the cleverest operatives of the British Intelligence!"

Hamilton was not surprised. But he watched his brother sharply. "How do you know that?"

"Because his superiors dined at Scarsta with me yesterday, Lord Cartwright and Sir Gerald Mackey."

Hamilton sniffed. "Fee fi fo fum, I thought I smelled the smell of Englishmen here. All the better then, my dear Titus. My little frog of Brattle Hill has still another item added to his growing list. I will find him and kill him if it is the last thing I do."

Titus did not answer at once. He leaned toward Hamilton, big, oppressive, quietly angry. "John, what have you done to us?"

"To us?"

"To *us,* the Hamiltons!" Titus' voice rose. "Dragged our good name through every swamp in the Virginia valley between here and Winchester! There's filth and disgrace upon it now! You've acted like a bloody peasant, an ill-mannered rooster who—"

Hamilton watched his brother steadily. "I have heard," he said evenly, "that a mud bath returns vigor to the body. Perhaps to a name also. The swamps might do it good. The swamps might rub off the stigma of Tory from the Hamilton name."

Titus swelled. "This is too much. Do you defend your actions? Are you proud of having stabbed George Norwood, of having humiliated Miss Anne before her family and her friends, of having spent a drunken night at an inn instead of returning to your own home, of having returned finally in a state of undress? You defend all this?"

"I do not bother to defend it," Hamilton sighed. "Life, in these last few hours, has proved very enjoyable and thrilling. Why should I defend it?"

Rage boiled up in Titus' soul, but he forced control upon himself and said slowly, ponderously, "By gad, John, this is the end of it. I'll have no more of it. I am finished!"

"You should have realized that a long time ago," Hamilton smiled. "Yes, Titus, you are finished, definitely. You belong to a dying cause, to tyranny, to fear and convention, to selfishness and bigotry. You *are* finished. This war men fight now is a war of ideals. It is a war of democracy, of the equal rights of men. It is a fight for liberty. What is liberty? It is an ideal, but it comes dear when you pay for it in blood. Do you think your Tory souls and British soldiers can win the fight when men shed their blood for so intangible a thing of a love of living honestly?"

"You defend scum," Titus said between set teeth, "but then when you do that, you defend yourself. They call you a rogue in this valley. By gad, you're that and more. You're a rogue, a scoundrel, and a thorough wastrel. You've no decency, no pride, no conscience. What have you to show for your years—nothing, nothing but the wild mind of a madman, the abandon of a satyr, a penniless—"

"What have I to show?" Hamilton said, rising to his feet with a faint smile and bowing in a grand manner. "Why, my dear and righteous Titus, I have everything to show. I have my dagger, I have my pistol, I have my sword, and I have"—he shook the box and threw them out onto the table with a rattle—"my dice." He laughed as they showed a winning number. "I have my health, my life, a zest for that life. I have my belly which enjoys its food and does not fill with belching like your own. These are the things I have. What more could a man want? A wife perhaps. And children. I have no doubt of my ability to gain either, Titus." He shrugged. "Please pardon me now. I must dress. I have business on the highway." And he left.

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WHEN he came down again, dressed in fresh clothes for his ride to come, he found Titus Hamilton waiting for him at the foot of the stairs. Titus said, "John, you have come home to Scarsta for the last time."

"I?" Hamilton said. "Not a bit of it, Titus. I have no intention of dying."

"It is not a case of dying," Titus said heavily. "I am turning you out. I am the master of Scarsta, John, or had you forgotten that? And it is no longer open to you from this day forward. An empty gesture to you, perhaps, you spend such little time home, but at least it divorces you from the name of Hamilton, the true and upright name of Hamilton and not your own insidious brand."

Hamilton looked amused. "It is your way of doing it, isn't it, Titus? You've always hated me, haven't you? This isn't what you'd really like to do. You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you? But you're afraid. You're afraid of my sword and my gun and me. So you'll turn me out instead. You must be an unhappy man, unhappy and lonely. I feel sorry for you."

"Damn you, John!" Titus said hotly. "Even in leaving you stay insolent. I want none of your sympathy. I give you here twenty pounds, the last penny you touch out of Scarsta!"

Hamilton shrugged and took it. "You expect me to refuse it in a burst of false pride, eh? Not I, Titus. Twenty pounds—yes, I can make it very useful."

"And I warn you," Titus said. "Keep away from Louise. Keep away from her in Richmond. I am sending her instructions that she is not to see you under penalty of my wrath!"

"Oh, Titus," Hamilton sighed, "you are a stuffy rooster. How can you stop me from seeing my own sister if I want to?"

"I forbid it!"

"Then forbid it over steel," Hamilton snapped. "I'm tired of your prattling, old maid of a man! You haven't seen the last of your black sheep, Titus. That's a promise! I'll come back some time soon to watch the militiamen of Morgan hang your sour face from a sourer—good lord, impossible—apple tree!"

"Get out of here, get out of here!"

"Yes," Hamilton said pleasantly as he stepped through the door to where Sam Dixie waited with Bony, the darky himself astride another horse, "Yes, Titus, it *is* a lovely day. I forgot to tell you that I am borrowing a slave and an extra horse from you. I doubt if I will return them, and if I do, I doubt if they will stay. *Au'voir.*".

"Keep away, I warn you," Titus said. "And you, Sam, take that horse and return to the stables."

Sam Dixie paused. He looked at Hamilton and said, "Massa Jawn?"

"As you please," Hamilton said.

"Den I go wit' yo', suh."

"Sam," said Titus, "you heard me. Go off with him and I'll have you flogged within an inch of your life when I get hands on you again."

"I go 'long wit' Massa Jawn, suh."

Hamilton laughed happily as the two of them rode down the wagon path of Scarsta and headed for the pike to Winchester.

CHAPTER VII

THE GASCON SWORD

RENE DuMAURIER heard the rattle of the coach's wheels on the stones outside the gate of the Hearthstone Inn at Woodridge, Virginia, and he glanced up from his lunch and looked outside. It was a black coach pulled by four horses and it ground to a stop before the inn. He dropped his eyes again to his plate and went on eating.

There was not much of him, he was a remarkably tiny man. In full height he barely reached five feet and a few inches, his weight was not much over a hundred pounds. And yet, he had about him an air of complete self-confidence. He was a Frenchman, very plainly, his fine manners at the table showed that.

You might have suspected from the polished grip of his sword that he had

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handled the weapon with more than average dexterity. Metal does not glitter from disuse.

He did not give the coach a second look then and would not have until he heard the voice. A horseman at the coach's side rode up and called to the inn-keeper of the Hearthstone and asked for water for the horses. The voice was faint and it reached René DuMaurier but barely.

Yet he instantly stiffened. It was the voice of a husky frog.

At the same time, his body servant, one Ferdinand Arteille, a dull and stupid fellow who came from the south of France and had been found by René DuMaurier one bright day on the King's Highway, Paris to Bordeaux, sitting in a field of flowers, and waiting for winter to come so that he might move away from the fragrance of the field, rushed into the dining-room of the Hearthstone, crying, *"Monsieur le Comte! Monsieur le Comte! C'est l'homme terrible! C'est le diable anglais!"*

"Indeed," DuMaurier said sharply. "And must you tell it to the world at large? Do you think then that the French language is as dead as the Latin, that none can hear you and understand your concern? Be quiet, you fool of a Ferdinand! The host looks at you. Now smile and bow, *bon, bon,* now gesture as if to follow me to my room, there, that is good, and now, knave, follow me and look as though there was some joy in this life which animates your shuddering carcass."

DuMaurier rose quickly and smiled politely at the innkeeper who had returned from the yard where he had ordered his stable boys to bring water for the coach. There was no danger, probably. Most of these inn-keepers were American enough. But even so, you might meet one with Tory money in his pocket, a fellow who might sell his principle to gain his wealth. You had to be careful.

A good spy, whether he was a Caxton in the British Intelligence, or a Comte René DuMaurier in the American Intelligence, was always careful.

But from the privacy of his own room, Comte René DuMaurier dropped his self-assurance and calm and sprang to his window. He could see the coach in the road below at an oblique angle, and as he watched, the horseman who had yelled at the inn-keeper rode back. *"Morbleu!"* DuMaurier snapped. "It is he without a doubt. It is Major Caxton!"

Ferdinand scratched his head. "Do you think he is after you this time, my old one?"

René DuMaurier shook his head. He was not an old one at all. He was under thirty, but he was homely, his nose quite large and thick, his face striated with lines, his features irregular, his eyes quietly gray and his brows shaggy black. *"Non,* Ferdinand," he said. "He is not after me. The last time we met was in New York. Of a certainty he is unaware of my presence in this valley. And yet—"

"And yet, my brave one?" Ferdinand said, his eyes wide.

"And yet," went on DuMaurier, "it is more than coincidence that Caxton prowls in Virginia. Wait! There is a woman in the coach, I saw her hand—"

HE STOPPED and watched sharply, fingering the grip of his sword while Ferdinand watched, breathless and in wonder. *"Pardieu,"* he whispered in dread, "it is *she!"*

"The evil one?"

"It is *she,"* cried DuMaurier. "La Tournada herself!"

Ferdinand gulped and grew white. "She of the dagger?"

"The same!"

A groan escaped from Ferdinand's lips. "Ah me, we are lost! She will have our lives, master! She will stop at nothing to bite her steel in you!"

But the thought did not disturb DuMaurier. He scowled at the coach. "There," he said. "They go! They are going north!"

"Then we are saved," said Ferdinand.

"Simple dolt," said DuMaurier sadly. "Must your mind always complicate itself

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in a problem of simple arithmetic? Why do you think so much of yourself, you whose life is not worth a sou at best? Would you consider the strange fact that both La Tournada and Major Caxton are in Virginia at the same time and at the same place? A matter of mere coincidence, *non? Non!* Is it not also a coincidence that last night Monsieur Callan struck southward to Lace Falls for the Richmond highway carrying sealed orders with him for General Lafayette?"

"But—"

"This is not the time for 'buts,' my churl," DuMaurier said, not unkindly. "This is the time for thought. Feast your eyes on this thing: the coach goes north with Caxton and Milady. North—*toward* New York."

"They are escaping *us,*" cried Ferdinand.

"*Non,* poor one," DuMaurier sighed. "They are, perhaps, taking M. Callan's orders back to General Howe in New York. They have perhaps met and slain M. Callan and removed his papers."

"Ah," groaned Ferdinand lustily. "It is tragedy then!"

"Not yet, not yet." DuMaurier waved his hand. "I have upon me a problem, peasant. Be still and let our brain think. I have the duplicates of Monsieur Callan's orders. They are intact?

"They are still in the bottom of my boot, master."

"Quiet, fool! Would you sketch a chart? But of what use will those orders be to General Lafayette if General Howe is aware of them and engages Washington on the march south?"

"None, master, none."

"It were better," DuMaurier rumbled, "that I follow Caxton and learn the truth. If he has the orders, then I, Comte René DuMaurier, must recover them!"

"And if he does not have them, master?"

"Why then," said the comte, "we will proceed at once to Richmond as before."

"I do not like it," Ferdinand grumbled. "My corns have an ache to them. It means danger."

"It means rain," said DuMaurier drily.

"But how will you find all this out from Caxton?"

"Who knows but the good God? But He will show me a way, poor numbskull, if you pray hard and I keep my wits agile. Quick then, to the stables, saddle the horses and let us be gone from this imitation of a hotel where the food is little better than the leather of the saddle which my bottom has polished so well. *Rapidement!*"

THE coach of Edith Desmond, covered now with the red dust which whipped up from the galloping hooves of the horses ahead, had but reached the bottom of Hollow Creek where the old Kilnline covered bridge went across the waters, a bare ten minutes out of Woodridge and the Hearthstone Inn, when John Hamilton and Sam Dixie appeared over the rise of Two Brothers' Knoll and saw the smoke from the chimney of the Hearthstone Inn a mile away.

They had ridden hard from Lace Falls and the two horses, Bony and Goshen, were white on the flanks with sweat and a little tired. Sam Dixie, not used to such a pace, was tired too, and he rolled his great eyes constantly at the speed, blessing himself with every magic charm he could remember. Atop Two Brothers' knoll, Hamilton reined in, and Goshen, following Bony's lead, nearly pitched Sam off into the dirt as the horse dug in and halted.

"Lawd," Sam breathed, panting in dismay, "why'nt y' wahn a body yo' gwine to dig up roots lak dat?"

Hamilton ignored the query and peered ahead. "There's the Hearthstone. They stopped for water there or I'm a walking cottonmouth! That's Tory, that place, plain Tory when British are around, and underground Tory when Americans abound."

"Ah t'ought old man Dasher run dat place?" Sam said.

"He does," said Hamilton. "But he takes English money."

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"We gwine to stop fo' a bite o' food, Massa Jawn? Glory to de lap o' Moses, but mah belly done drop down in mah heels fo' wantin' of vi'tals. We gwine to stop dere, son?"

"We'll stop for a bit," Hamilton said. "The horses are tired. We can't be far behind them now. A coach couldn't come as fast as we've come. I expected to sight them before this. Let's get on then."

They rode off hard once more, down the north side of the Knoll and they quickly polished off the remaining ribbon of road which separated them from the gray-blue smoke which rose into the thin air over the distant inn. They thundered into the yard out front, and Hamilton swung off Bony, patted her flank and instructed Sam Dixie to care for the horses and that food would be sent out to him in the stables.

It was unfortunate that both John Hamilton and Comte René DuMaurier happened to be in a hurry at the same particular moment, for they met at a door which would not allow the passage of two bodies, no matter how short or tall. Ordinarily, Hamilton would have stepped back and allowed the other to pass. But this time he was impatient to eat, refresh himself, and be on the road again, and as he went in, he was so completely engrossed in the thought of meeting the coach, Milady Desmond and Major Rolph Caxton once more, that he did not look where he was going.

Comte René DuMaurier, on the other hand, was the essence of politeness, and one who, considering at the moment the urgency of his profession, did not go out of his way to be rude and start a quarrel. But he also happened to be engrossed with a mind-picture of that same coach, the same occupants, and it was time that the lout, Ferdinand, had finished the horses and time they should be on their way. So perturbed was DuMaurier over what he believed had happened, the slaying of Jeb Callan and the subsequent theft of the papers, that *he* did not look where he was going.

They both met in the doorway and crashed into each other.

Hamilton's big frame felt the shock little. DuMaurier, on the other hand, bounced back into the inn to sit upon his bottom. Some diners at the inn laughed rudely. Ferdinand came up outside with the horses at that second, and Sam Dixie, who had just started to leave, scented trouble and stopped, waiting expectantly, his black hand stealing to the long knife in his belt, all but the knob of its hilt concealed.

DuMAURIER might have passed the moment even then, but the humiliating laughter of the diners within the inn rang in his ears and stirred his blood. He rose to his feet and bounced out into the yard where Hamilton had fallen back in small surprise. "Elephant," DuMaurier cried hotly in the French tongue. "Species of bed bug! Snake with orange eyes! Pig, hog, swine! Robber of blind beggars!"

"Why, *monsieur,*" Hamilton said, in mock horror. "Such language. It is insulting. *Je comprends francais!*"

"You speak French?" DuMaurier said, surprised. But he had gone too far to stop then. "Very well, I repeat it to your face in English that you may make no mistake! You are a clumsy elephant! Why did you not look where you were going?"

"And did you, *monsieur?*" Hamilton said. "If so, why did you not avoid me?"

"The pig avoids the farmer," said DuMaurier. "The slave avoids the master! *I* avoid you! It is insulting!"

"It is, on the contrary, ridiculous," said Hamilton. "And now if you will bear to leave me—"

"Leave? I demand an apology, *monsieur!*"

Hamilton stopped and frowned at the Frenchman. But he found that he could not be angry with the fellow. DuMaurier was such a little man with such a sober and serious face, and that nose! Like a peninsula! Hamilton smiled. He was amused and he showed it. Even DuMaurier's anger had a certain charm. Hamilton, for answer, turned to Sam Dixie and said,

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"Sam, I would not advise you to use this front door unless you have something for use as a swatter. There is a fair-sized gnat which gives you quite a bump and it lurks here some place."

DuMaurier went purple. "Tail of a jackass!" he cried. "I will cut your ears off!"

"Aow!" cried Hamilton, wincing. "An insult! It makes my arm ache! I warn you, sir, flee while you can. This hand of mine gropes for my sword. I can hold it but so long!"

"You," replied DuMaurier, "are a braggart, a blowhard, a giant with the heart of a flea! Will you draw and fight, hippopotamus?"

Hamilton laughed at the Frenchman's earnestness. "No, *monsieur,*" he bowed. "I will not. I do not fight with dwarfs. I would not want people to say that I chose to kill only little men."

"Bah!" said DuMaurier, infuriated by the casual manner in which Hamilton dismissed him. "You have the strength of a string and the heart of a chicken. Your backbone is the stuff of jelly. The sword is an equalizer of men, it makes little men giants and sometimes it makes giants corpses. You are afraid!"

"Afraid!" Hamilton said darkly. "Come taste my blade then if you are hungry for eternal Morpheus!"

THEIR swords sang out in unison, a shimmering sound like the resonant twang of a longbow's thread. Then, as their blades touched, the musical ring of the striking steel quickly followed and they moved at each other. Sam Dixie, looking severely intent about it all, moved his horse opposite that of DuMaurier's servant, Ferdinand, so that he had a straight line in which to hurl his knife should Ferdinand, who did not have the brains to think that far ahead, attempt to save his master. In the inn, the diners quickly cried out and ran for the door to watch the duel. A crowd gathered as the two went at it.

Before Hamilton had even made his first lunge, he became acutely aware that for the first time he had met a swordsman who might have his life. The little French midget was a demon with the blade. They crossed swords, teasing each other's blade for the inside line and Hamilton, with a feeling of cold pervading him, could not feel the weight of his opponent's steel at all and thus could not sense in what direction it might travel.

He parried two quick thrusts and counter-thrust himself but he struck at air and his sword slid off the hilt of DuMaurier's. The sweat began to run on Hamilton's face and he was glad to note, in a glance during the fray, that DuMaurier's face looked wet also. The action went quickly. Hamilton had difficulty in watching the sword-point opposite him. It moved like lightning, binding, beating, coming in at him. It was almost impossible to see. Now and then the sunlight exploded upon it.

There was no sound at all from the on-watchers. The beauty, the perfect precision of the fencing left them both aghast and awed. The men looked stricken that swords could be handled in such wonder and the fighters live to tell the tale. The women, aware that only one can win a duel, waited for the end in pallid and mounting horror.

Before long twenty minutes had passed, and both Hamilton and DuMaurier had not touched each other. They both dripped sweat and they both panted. Not a word had passed between them up to this, but at last DuMaurier feinted twice and then made a beautiful lunge which passed the point of his sword so close to Hamilton's left side that the steel actually impaled Hamilton's coat and left a thin slit in the material when it was withdrawn. "By gad," Hamilton breathed in grim admiration at the way the feints had drawn his parry off, "you fight like a Gascon, *monsieur!*"

"*Like* a Gascon!" DuMaurier grunted, defending himself as Hamilton moved forward in a walking attack and beat down the Frenchman's blade, searching for a gap to pass his sword over and through, "*I am* a Gascon, sir!"

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"A Gascon?" Hamilton said, amazed. "You are a Gascon, *monsieur le tigre?*"

"I am!"

"The ilk of de Bergerac and D'Artagnan?"

"The same!"

"*Monsieur!*" Hamilton drew back and dug his blade into the dust. He clicked his heels. "I refuse to fight. I cannot kill a Gascon. It goes against my grain."

"AHA!" DuMaurier cried, quietly pleased, but adamant. "It is that you have fear of a Gascon, eh, *monsieur?*"

"It is," replied Hamilton, "that I have respect for one."

"You are afraid!"

"What?" Hamilton cried, and sprang at DuMaurier again.

For ten minutes more, the fight continued, a fight of white heat, the exchanges and thrusts and parries so rapid that the spectators could not even see the flashes of the blades. DuMaurier sweated and grew pale now, and finally he cried, exasperated, "I must kill you!"

"You may at that," Hamilton replied grimly.

"You admit I am your better!"

"I do not! I admit you are my equal!"

"Ah!" said DuMaurier, pleased. "One moment, *monsieur.*" The swords dropped down and they faced each other. "You yourself fight like a Gascon."

Hamilton nodded. "I was taught by a Gascon."

"No!"

"Yes. You wish his name? Capitaine Franco LaSalle."

"The captain of the musketeers!"

"*Oui, à Paris!*"

DuMaurier looked shocked. "*Monsieur!* Why did you not tell me this? How can we kill each other if we both fight as in Gascony? *C'est impossible!* Gascons cannot kill each other. They match too equal! And you—a student of *mon ami* Franco LaSalle!" He bowed. "I apologize for my hot words, *monsieur.*"

Hamilton smiled. "And I for mine!"

A man in the crowd snickered. "One would expect them to dance together now. They are so polite."

"*What?*" Hamilton roared.

"Scum!" flashed DuMaurier, extending his blade.

The spectators vanished amidst a little cry from the ladies, and the field of battle was left to the combatants. They sheathed their swords and then DuMaurier rushed over and embraced Hamilton. "My friend! You are a brave man! You are a gentleman! Already I feel a fondness for you in my heart! We shall be brothers! Your name?"

"John Hamilton, *monsieur!*"

"*Morbleu!* You are he then, the one they call the Rogue of Shenendoah? I have heard of you! You are an American!"

"I was born in Virginia," said Hamilton.

"*Oui,* yes, but others were born here and remain Tory. You are the true American. Your heart goes with Washington."

Hamilton nodded. "That is true." He coughed. "And you, sir?"

"Comte René DuMaurier," said the Frenchman proudly. "Like General Lafayette, I am on holiday from Paris."

Hamilton smiled slyly. "What you mean is, you are enlisted in the American cause?"

"Hush! More of that I will tell later when we have left the prying ears of informers behind. You are going to Winchester?"

"I am. But first, food."

"Food by all means. And I will delay, and go with you."

"But, Count DuMaurier," Hamilton said, "you were in a hurry?"

"True, I am following a coach which just passed through this town, but—"

"A coach?" Hamilton cried. "With a treacherously lovely lady flanked by a frog on horseback?"

"The same!"

"It is the same *I* follow!" Hamilton exclaimed. "The man—I have a score with him—he is my frog of Brattle Hill! And the lady, damn her wonderful insolence, has robbed me of important papers which I had planned to deliver to Richmond!"

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"Monsieur," said DuMaurier, gravely, "there is something in what you say which leads me to believe we have a common cause. If I were to mention the name Callan—aha!—then you carry his papers? He is dead?"

"Yes," Hamilton cried. "She has stolen them!" He grimaced. "I was off to enlist with the armies. I have made a bad beginning."

"A bad beginning perhaps, M. Hamilton, but one which we will rectify. Edith Desmond is the most dangerous spy in the British Intelligence. They call her La Tournada."

"La Tournada—the one with the dagger—"

"The same."

"Then," said Hamilton in cold fury, "it was all a trick to draw me away. She baited me while he stole my things! I'll be the death of them!"

"Ah," said DuMaurier happily. "And in that quest, *monsieur,* you are hereby offered my name, my honor, my money, and, but not least, my sword. Hurry and let us be on the way! We follow the same coach! And for the sake of your enlistment, I hereby swear you into the American Intelligence, *monsieur,* and tell you frankly that I already love you like my own!"

CHAPTER VIII

PURSUIT OF MILADY

THEY were a sight to see, those four horsemen of the Apocalypse as they thudded north past Bring Bridge and Crow's Gap hot on the dust of Milady Desmond's coach. There was John Hamilton, out in front on the black mare Bony, the horse stretched out like a galloping hare, the rider bent forward in the wind, his cloak cracking whiplike in the blast of wind from the speed. Behind their heels, came DuMaurier, the white and blue plume upon his hat bent over in the breeze, his nose so long and large that sometimes he looked, when leaning forward, to be ahead of his own horse; so tiny was he that he looked like the spawn of the giant who rode ahead of him. And then the dark sober face of Sam Dixie mounted on Goshen, his eyes white and fearful against his own dusky skin. And behind him, Ferdinand, the dolt, lopping crazily in his saddle, hanging to the saddle horn, having dropped the reins, one hand on his hat to hold it on his head, the horse following the others for sheer company and not by guidance.

The sun was an hour past its zenith which they rode into Carteret, which was a small hamlet not more than six miles outside the limits of Winchester town. They stopped at an inn, the Golden Horn, which was scarcely more than a shack, and here they watered their horses while Hamilton made inquiries of the inn-keeper.

Hamilton came back to his friends excitedly. "They passed through here but ten minutes ago!" he said. "Their dust will fill our noses all the rest of the way!"

"Ma foi," sighed DuMaurier, "we have made up the time we lost them. I thought perhaps we had passed them in a rush of wind a way back, so much like the lightning of heaven did we go! Phew! Even my nose, which is the strongest member of me, grows tired in this dash."

"Courage, my friend," Hamilton said excitedly. "Think of the game we hunt for!"

DuMaurier frowned. "John," he said quietly, "I have been thinking of this game we hunt. And I have been thinking of you. In this hour together, we have become friends. You have opened your heart and soul to me and you have told me all, but have you not noticed that I was reticent, that I did not tell you anything but my name?"

"But it is none of my business," Hamilton said. "You will tell me what you wish to tell me. What I have told you, I wanted to tell you."

"John," Count DuMaurier said, "I will tell you all now. But first I had to find in you one of trust. My calling is of such hazardous nature that I needs must be of the close mouth. But you I can trust."

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"Are you sure?"

"I am sure," said DuMaurier. "What you have already told me proves that, this tale of Jeb Callan and the theft of the papers. *Monsieur,* Callan was not a spy. He was a messenger. He was one of a series of messengers carrying that sheaf which has passed into La Tournada's hands. He received the packet when it reached Virginia and it was up to him to deliver it into Lafayette's hands. But there is a duplicate of those same orders. I carry them."

"You too are a messenger then?"

"And sometimes more, my friend."

"Then why do you bother to follow Milady to Winchester?" Hamilton asked. "Why don't you go on to Richmond and deliver the orders?"

DuMaurier sighed. "If it were that simple—but it is not. I am aware, *monsieur,* of what those orders are. They prescribe a route of march and a time of attack. General Washington plans to strike south suddenly, join Lafayette and the French fleet and lay seige to Cornwallis at Yorktown. Of what use are these orders to Lafayette when General Howe may have the same ones in his hands? General Howe will then move to intercept Washington no matter what the cost. The march will be halted, the siege a bubble."

"I understand," Hamilton said fiercely. "We must prevent the papers from returning to New York."

"C'est vrai."

"You are certain they have not been decoded?"

"It is a new code. I am certain that La Tournada and Major Caxton did not know the key. In all probability, Milady Desmond will carry them back and leave Caxton in this land. She probably carries them now. It is she we must reach!"

"Then I am the one to do that," said Hamilton. "She knows me, she thinks me a likely fool, she probably believes I consider her an abducted lady and will help her in her escapade. She might consider me an ally for the love of her. Let us get on to Winchester then!"

"This Winchester," DuMaurier said, "what sort of place is it for the health of men like ourselves?"

"It is a bad spot," replied Hamilton, "for Englishmen. It is full of Colonial trappers and only those Tories who are wealthy and powerful have escaped the wrath of the township. There have been burnt houses. I saw them only a day ago when I—"

"They will stop there without a doubt," DuMaurier said. "Where will they stay?"

"Why," said Hamilton, frowning, "I don't know."

"A hotel? An inn?"

"Too dangerous."

"A refuge? An underground stop-over? A Tory home?"

"The Norwoods!" Hamilton cried. "By gad, that would be a pretty pickle! Still—"

"You think you know?"

"I think perhaps I can learn."

"Good, let us hurry then!"

THEY rode the last six miles like a whirlwind, and DuMaurier and Hamilton soon outdistanced the two servants, black and white. Before they left each other, Hamilton called to Sam Dixie and told him the rendezvous would be the home of Caleb Woodstock. Sam knew where it was. More than once he carted Hamilton's frame there to sober up in a night to be ready for the pike in the morning.

When Hamilton and DuMaurier reached Winchester, it was mid-afternoon and the sun was hot. Not a soul was in sight, the summer heat by day brought with it a natural siesta time. A stray dog sleepily evaded the hooves of their horses. They saw a darky lolling sleepily on a doorstep. Hamilton ground to a stop before the man and tapped his nodding head with the flat of his sword. "Wake up, you black devil of a lazing lump!"

The darky came out of it with his eyes bulging from his head. He saw the sword first, the black mare second, the big frame of Hamilton third, and his mouth jiggled with fright.

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"Have you been asleep long?"

"Ah jes' bin dozin', sah," the darky cried. "Ah bin dozin' on'n'off doin' no hahm, sah!"

"Did you see a coach come through here a few minutes ago?" Hamilton roared in a terrible voice, for he wanted the truth and not a convenient lie for an affirmative.

"Yassah, yassah," cried the darky in terror. "Ah seed de coach, sah! Black ez naht wid fo' ho'ses hawlin' it an' a lady insahde! Dere was a geenerman aho'se 'longsahde!"

Hamilton said, more quietly, "That's it. Which way?"

"Wes'," said the darky. "Dey go wes' out'n to de Norwood place! Dey was gwine lak a blue bolt, sah!"

"Back to sleep, Gabriel!" Hamilton snapped. "And wipe me and my questions from your mind, if you have one!"

He and DuMaurier spurred their horses and rode west through the sleepy town. It was a quaint place, a vision of red brick and white wood and part of the street held cobbles which petered off into red dirt. Hamilton did not ride fast and prompted DuMaurier to say, "What holds us up, *mon ami?*"

"There is no point in hurrying now," Hamilton said. "They have gone to the Norwood plantation. It is the only place of note on this road. They cannot go to New York that way unless they ride clean over to Ohio and doubled back and I hardly think they will do that. Remember, they do not suspect they are being followed.

"Eh *bien.* And then?"

"They will have to return this way to reach the pike for Philadelphia and New York. I think they will stop over at Norwood's tonight. We can do nothing by day. Matter of fact, Count, I should not even be seen here by day."

"You are known to the Norwoods?"

Hamilton laughed, a little bitterly. "Too well perhaps."

"Then you plan to wait until tonight?"

"Yes. We can get all the information we need from Sam Dixie. We'll wait for him at Caleb Woodstock's place. When he arrives, I'll send him on to Norwood's plantation. He can put in there without notice. He's a slave, he has a cousin in the Norwood slaves. He can look around and then report back to us. And tonight we'll see what we can do."

"*Monsieur,*" exclaimed René DuMaurier happily, "you are a genius, a true genius, and, in the bargain, a very convenient man to know."

"Time," replied Hamilton drily, "may prove you wrong on that last point. There is Woodstock's. We'll go in."

CHAPTER IX

BEWARE LA TOURNADA

THE night came down slowly and still Sam Dixie did not put in an appearance. Hamilton watched the lush twilight against the black and rugged peaks of the Alleghenies to the west and he was vaguely disturbed. The only consolation he had in the delay was the fact that gunpowder would not have made Sam Dixie move fast if he had no mind to do so.

That afternoon, Sam and Ferdinand had finally arrived and Sam had been dispatched to the Norwood place. The darky had been quite confident of his ability to do a little espionage and, as a matter of fact, he was very anxious to see his cousin, Emeralda, because she was going to have a baby soon and Sam's mammy had given him a special charm for Emeralda to wear and protect herself. So Sam Dixie went off to Norwood's in good spirits and little fear.

But now, with the shadows lengthening across the valley of Virginia and the sun dying beyond the mountains, Hamilton did not look gay and he paced the floor of Caleb Woodstock's house nervously.

Comte René DuMaurier, on the other hand, was very much at ease. At first he had been amazed at the rugged simplicity of Caleb's home, its interior raw pine with a great granite fireplace, powder-horns and pelts strung on the walls, along with a rusty saber and two rifles with a shotgun. He had been amazed, too, by

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Caleb Woodstock himself, for Caleb could not have been a very old man, yet he was full of wild tales and wisdom, and the wind and the rain of wilderness had made his face a leathery blotch of lines and highlights, and encounters with Injuns had put a scar or two in his head. His hospitality outdid the finest that DuMaurier had ever accepted, and he had visited with King Louis of France. A king and a trapper were far apart, indeed, DuMaurier thought. One gave you from his wealth, and the other gave you from his heart. DuMaurier listened to the tales of Caleb in awe, and as for poor Ferdinand, his hair all but turned white when Caleb showed his arrow scars.

The night was complete, black and still, except for the chirping night bugs, when there was a clatter outside the house and a horse rode up to the door. Hamilton sprang instantly to the entrance and opened the door in time to see Sam Dixie slide crazily off Goshen. "Sam!" Hamilton cried sharply. "Are you hurt?"

"No, Massa Jawn," Sam said. "Ah jest is hurryin', dat's awl."

Hamilton grabbed the darky. "If you're hurrying," he said, "I'd hate to see you taking things slowly. Where have you been? I thought they'd murdered you! I was getting ready to go up and find out for myself!"

"Why, Massa Jawn," Sam said, "ah couldn' git away no quicker den ah did. Ah hadda wait upon de dark so no'un could see me go and suspishon me, suh."

The door was shut and they moved into the living room. DuMaurier left Ferdinand to listen to Caleb's tales, but Caleb stopped his telling to listen to Sam's report.

"Well," Sam said, "dey dere awl raht."

"Both of them?" Hamilton said, elated. His eyes brightened. "Lady Desmond and my frog of Brattle Hill?"

"No," said Sam. "Dey was both dere dis yafternoon. But den dis man Caxton, he leave aho'se and he gwine back t' Lace Falls. He gwine t'meet up'n wit' two gennermen dere. Dey call one a lawd."

"CARTWRIGHT," said DuMaurier. "Lord Cartwright. Then Sir Gerald Mackey must be with him. They are Caxton's superiors, John. I last saw them in Richmond. If they are in Lace Falls, it means the British are afraid. They must scent that Washington, like the old fox he is, is up to something. They happen to be right."

"How did you learn this, Sam?" Hamilton asked.

"Ah gotta big ear, Massa Jawn."

"Good work. And what about Milady Desmond?"

"She gwine t' spend de naht wit' de Norwoods," Sam said. "Den she gwine t' move on t' New Yawk in de mornin'."

"Ah," DuMaurier sighed. "She has the papers then. I was quite right, *non?*" He beamed at the darky. "This servant of yours, John, he makes an excellent spy."

Hamilton laughed at Sam's grin. "Tell me something else, Sam, how is George Norwood?"

"Lawd, Massa Jawn, yo' sho' stick dat boy proper! He in bed and makin' up fine. Ain't nothin' much, Emeralda tole me, he was walkin' 'round today. But great junipah berries, how dat boy howl and groan lak he was dyin'. He puttin' it on, suh. He say he shoot yo' on sight."

"And Miss Anne?" Hamilton said.

"I seen her jest oncet," Sam said. "She look maghty sad, suh. She jest mopin' 'round de place lak she lost a husband. She look soft and kinda sweet'n'sad."

"Sweet and sad!" Hamilton breathed, pleased. "Crying perhaps?"

"She shed a tear o' two, Massa Jawn. Her ahs don't look lak dey sleep good."

"Then Kathie was right! She loves me!"

Sam Dixie coughed and looked discomfitted. "Ain' so sho' 'bout dat, Massa Jawn. Matter o' fact is she sweet and sad 'bout po' George who yo' run yo' sticker in. She ain' cryin' 'bout yo' none."

Hamilton's face fell perceptibly. "You're certain, Sam?"

"Sho' as rain," Sam said. "Dis Majer Caxton, he git t' talkin' t' Old Man Nor-

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wood, and he say, 'Suh,' he say, jest lak he was gwine t' tell a good tale, 'didja evah heah tell of a rascal by de name Jawn Hamilton?' Well, suh, Old Man Norwood, he rise up lak fire in de turkey brush and he say, "Ah thank yo', suh, not t'mentshun dat name in dis yere house, suh.' And den Miz Anne, she say, 'Dat's all raght, father, dat's all right. We talk 'bout horsethieves and Injuns and other scum, we maght jest well tak 'bout Jawn Hamilton.' And den ah done heah no mo'."

"Mon ami," DuMaurier said, quietly crushed. "This is the lady of whom you told me, your bride to be? I am devastated. She is a Norwood? It is terrible. Why did you not tell me this Norwood place and this lady you meant to marry, they were the same? My heart bleeds for you. You cannot go through with it."

Sam Dixie gaped.

"Go through with what?" Hamilton said bitterly, only half-hearing the count.

"Why," said DuMaurier, "you cannot attempt to reach Milady Desmond at the Norwood plantation. If you were caught, they'd have the life out of you!"

Hamilton shrugged. "And would it be so different with you if you were caught in my stead, Count?"

"I would start, at least," replied DuMaurier, smiling faintly, "with a chance to lie my way out of it, which you could not do."

"You do not know," Hamilton said, "how good a liar I am."

DuMaurier showed surprise. "You mean to go through with it?"

"Of course. I may need your help. Sam, what are the chances?"

Sam Dixie shook his head. "Mah bones ache, Massa Jawn. Dat don' mean so good."

"And my corns!" Ferdinand cried. "My corns hurt. It means there is danger!"

"Never mind the medical symptoms," Hamilton snapped. "I mean is the Norwood place guarded."

"Dat's what ah mean by mah bones," Sam Dixie said. "Dey got lotta men up dere, suh. Wit' pistols in dere belts. Six seben men. Dey look lak soldiers wit'out uniforms."

"Morbleu!" DuMaurier frowned. "That is not good."

"THEY sleep like any other mortals," Hamilton replied. "It is only a precaution, they do not expect anyone to swoop down on them. I fancy the guards are there to halt hot-headed Colonials bent on burning the homes of Tories. They had four such guards when I rode up to be married."

Sam Dixie looked ashamed. "Maybe dere *was* only four, suh. Maybe ah got big eyes, suh."

"I thought so," Hamilton said. "Damn your eyes, Sam. Look here, Count. They'll not be expecting a pair of us to steal in there by night. I tell you the place will be dark as midnight. If we wait until ten and then go up, I promise you we'll come back with those papers."

"Oui, oui," DuMaurier joined in, his eyes bright with the impending excitement, "But *how, monsieur?* The papers they do not wait there for the mere plucking. Milady Desmond did not find the name of La Tournada by being a poor spy. She is clever."

"She is a woman," said Hamilton.

"Physically, yes," DuMaurier nodded. "But she thinks like a man, my friend. And there is nothing dainty nor charming in the *modus operandi* of her stab." He closed his eyes thoughtfully and appeared to dream up a picture. "The knife itself is small, the blade, bright as nickel, no more than four inches long. The grip is pearl. She holds it flat in her palm, in the grip of supination, so to speak. She smiles at you, oh so exquisitely, and then *zsst!* She thrusts, and la! you have cold steel in your belly." DuMaurier opened his eyes. "She is deadly, that one."

Hamilton shivered at the Frenchman's tone. "You speak like one with authority," he said slowly. "And yet, I can't quite believe it, René. Beauty is only skin-deep, I know, but she has a soul. I know that. It is an honest sort of soul."

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DuMaurier looked stern. "John. Before we continue in this escapade, there is something I must show you. I am afraid that it is you sentimentalize La Tournada too much for your own safety. You cannot trust her any more than you can trust a *serpente aux sonnettes*. For proof of that, I bare myself." And he ripped open his coat and shirt to exhibit to Hamilton a ghastly red scar on his stomach. "Some of her victims, my friend, do not die, but rather live to tell the tale and wait patiently upon her life."

"You!"

"Four years ago, young romancer. In Montreal, when Burgoyne tried to strike south and met with defeat in the forests."

"By gad!"

René DuMaurier nodded. "Yes, *mon brave,* I think from your face that this lesson is complete. I think perhaps you will be careful. I ask you one thing: remember this hideous thing in my flesh all the time. It is not clean like the sword wound, it is twisted. It could happen to you. *C'est bien.* Let us attack. . . ."

THE crickets were chirping cheerfully all around them and the sound was a pleasant one. John Hamilton felt at home in the open. This was earth, Virginia. All it lacked to make the spell of night complete was the smell of fresh rain and the plaintive beautiful note of a night bird. But that would have put the stars to bed. A pity you couldn't have both. "Quiet!" Hamilton snapped to the count. "You broke a twig there."

"Mon dieu!" whispered DuMaurier wrily. "I am no woodsman, John! I am no Caleb Woodstock! Forgive me this."

Hamilton did not reply. He watched the white brick home of the Norwood, palatial and lovely in the moonlight up on the rise of the hill, far back from the rough stone fence which encircled the property. They had tied their horses near a clump of rhododendron bushes in a glade across the road.

"There are no lights but one," DuMaurier said.

"Yes," Hamilton nodded. "That one is nothing. They burn a candle in the lower hall at night. The house is dark. They have all retired. I'm sure of that."

"Eh? And the guards?"

Hamilton shrugged. "Who can tell? It's a risk we'll have to take."

"And now?"

"So simple," Hamilton said, "that it is bound to go wrong. I know this house, René. And I know that if Edith Desmond is a guest here for the night, she'll have been given the Blue Room. It is the Norwood's gift of elegance to any guest. All right. There sleeps Milady. We go up there. I climb the trellis and enter her room, the window will be open this warm night. You stand below. You wait ten minutes—no—fifteen minutes. Count off each one. And then you cry 'Fire!!' and make for your horse. Get away no matter what happens, I'll throw you the papers from the window. Meet me back at Caleb's house."

"Sacristi!" DuMaurier swore, rubbing his long nose briskly. "I smell it, a scent which is not good, like the manure in the stables. Danger, John. I smell it with this peninsula I breathe with. Much danger."

"What?" Hamilton said gayly. "With your sword below and my own above? Gascons' swords?"

"Swords and a woman," said DuMaurier. "The woman is sharper and more tempered."

"But the sword," replied Hamilton quickly, "is faster and more respected. Talk wastes precious time, *mon vieux.* It is action now. Let us go."

They left their horses behind and crept over the stone wall and onto the long sweeping stretch of greensward. They were black bulks in the moonlight and they moved, low down and inconspicuously and slowly, a bit of dread in each of their hearts that a challenge might ring out in the stillness. There went the giant—Hamilton, and the dwarf—DuMaurier, without a sound, except for the pounding of their hearts in their own ears.

Close to the house then. And some

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gravel to be stepped on gently. The wind was from the west and it blew gently, touching their wet faces, wet with the sweat of anticipation, like a caress. Here was the white trellis, half-buried beneath the rose vines thick with the opened pinks. By day a climb through those flowers would have been a painful thing; the bees hung close. By night the bees were gone; only the heavenly scent of the flowers remained.

"Here," Hamilton whispered. "Keep the voice of your scabbard still. It is that window above me. I'll climb now."

"John," René DuMaurier whispered, grasping Hamilton's hand. "I say this to you now. *Vous êtes un orai homme!* I love you like a brother. It is so strange, we have known each other so short a time, and yet, in my heart, there is friendship which one offers his life to keep intact. Let me go in your place."

"No." Hamilton patted DuMaurier's arm. *"Merci,* my brave friend. But I promise to come back."

"Ah," sighed DuMaurier. "It was so simple for them to take the papers from you, and now so hard to get them back. You were a fool for the love of her."

Hamilton smiled. "It was a pleasant night. May this one be as sweet."

"Allons, alors," DuMaurier said then. "Go, be of a careful mind and step, and should you meet Kismet on the way, hold back his arm and be polite and kick him not in the trousers. Fate holds such things against one. I pray for you, my friend, the most powerful prayer which René DuMaurier, Comte de Chauville, have ever prayed before."

Hamilton smiled once, then turned to the trellis and went up it silently, hand over hand, his cloak rustling in the night wind.

DuMaurier, standing on the ground, thought to himself how much like a climbing lion that big body looked, and he waited, shivering with suspense and dread, and automatically began to count off the seconds of the minutes he must wait.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Laugh at the Birdie

AT a recent convention of psychologists Mr. A. A. Roback delivered a paper on photography which is going to encourage a lot of people and maybe frighten some others as well. Mr. Roback called his paper, "Assimilating and Determining Tendency in Photography," but you needn't worry about the title. The point is that photographs vary according to the attitude of the sitter and the attitude and purpose of the photographer, Mr. Roback believes.

In other words, photographers who specialize in politicians will, given the chance, make anybody look like a politician (perish the thought!). And if the sitter cherishes a secret desire to become a politician, the resulting picture will be so convincing that he will probably be governor in no time at all. Maybe that's all right. But say you go to have your bridal picture taken, and the hobby of the man behind the camera happens to be marine photography, studies of fish—how is that picture going to turn out? One thing Mr. Roback's theory does explain: the men who take your passport picture must have spent their apprenticeship photographing the boys in the police lineup.

—John Nelson.

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"Stand up and fight," Nick gasped

Next of Kin

By JOHN RANDOLPH PHILLIPS

Author of "No Stop at Juno," "The Boss of Wildtown," etc.

The tale of a mountain feud that the winner lost

THE sun that morning came up red and fiery, ruthlessly driving the mist before it, shooting long, flashing lances of arrogant light across the piney hills to the east. Even then Nick Tillar had a premonition of trouble to come. It hung in the very air as he did the morning chores; it glittered in the smouldering eyes of his older brother Wayne.

And clammy, invisible fingers seemed to reach through his flesh and fasten on his bones. He was suddenly afraid, for Nick was the quiet one of the two Tillar brothers. He and Wayne were the last of the fighting Tillars, and he was not a fighter. At twenty he stood one inch better than six feet and weighed a lean, muscular one hundred eighty-six, yet he had never in all his life lifted his fist, much less a gun or knife, against any man.

His brother and their two belligerent cousins, Scott and Flint Howard, dismissed him always with the terse comment, "no grit." Which did not greatly bother Nick. He had seen fights and fights and had yet to see the first good come from any of them.

"We logging ag'in today?" Wayne muttered.

"Sure," Nick replied. "We got to get them logs out 'fore the other work ketches up with us." He had to speak boldly, force-

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fully, else Wayne would talk him out of starting the work before them.

"You don't think 'bout nothing but work," Wayne grumbled. He slammed his knife down on the breakfast table and stood up, tall and straight and fiery. Half an inch shorter than Nick, and ten pounds lighter, he nevertheless cut a much better figure. There was something certain and dominant about Wayne. Now he fixed Nick with a penetrating gaze. "What I ought to do is go into town and see that horse-trader, Denby."

"Wayne," Nick said mildly, "Denby told you that mule was wind-broke when he sold him to you. Said he'd do light work, all right, but not no heavy stuff. That's why he sold him so cheap."

"He gypped me," Wayne answered stubbornly.

"No," Nick persisted. "You thought the mule wasn't as bad as Denby thought he was. You thought *you* was putting something over on *him*. When you come to find out you wasn't you couldn't take it."

"You're a liar," Wayne said.

It was characteristic of Nick Tillar that he passed up this insult. Swallowing the last of his corn pone, dipped in molasses, he rose lithely to his feet. "Let's go get them logs."

They crossed the barn pasture, Wayne riding the sound one of their two mules, Nick walking. They forded the quarreling creek and climbed the ivy bluff and came at last to the piece of timber in which they had been cutting. While Wayne rolled a cigarette, Nick with his ax notched a towering pine. Then the brothers attacked it with the crosscut saw. They followed an unvarying pattern: cut half a dozen sawlogs, then snake them down with the mule to the spot on the road where Dixon's sawmill truck would pick them up.

At eleven o'clock Wayne released his end of the saw with a jerk. "I'm knocking off for the day."

Nick said: "I can't pull no crosscut saw by myself."

"Then you can stand on your head and pertend you're looking for fishing worms."

Nick saw that, as usual, it was no use to oppose Wayne. By himself he snaked down the last half dozen logs to the road. His thoughts ran disjointedly: "Me and the old mule snaking logs. Reckon we're kind of alike. . . . Wonder where Wayne went. . . . Lord, that old sun looks red and mad today."

Later he sat on a log in the shade and ate his lunch, while the mule browsed in the underbrush. Ants crawled across his feet. From a near-by chestnut oak a squirrel quarreled incessantly with him. Far away in the ivy bluffs a wild turkey hen yelped once to her brood of youngsters. Suddenly he saw a bird, flitting through the woods, that looked exactly like a bluejay. He knew it wasn't a bluejay, knew it wasn't the season of the year for them, but he shivered.

"Old jaybird," he said. "Bad luck every time."

HASTILY he set about felling more trees. He could cut them down, he reasoned, and tomorrow he and Wayne could saw them into sawlog lengths. So he swung the ax lustily and once in a while he hummed a tune. Work? He didn't mind it. He liked it. Good for a man to raise a sweat and feel his muscles doing exactly what his brain told them. Good for a man to feel that he was getting somewhere; doing something important and doing it well. What difference did Wayne's derision make to him? Wayne who was always saying to Scott Howard and Flint: "Look at that Nick. Why, he *likes* to work!"

If only Wayne liked it half as well, they'd get somewhere. But Wayne found his fun in other ways. Still, he sometimes got sick and tired of the way Wayne acted. Felt like taking a stick to him. Felt like telling him a thing or two.

And still his uneasiness persisted, that sense of trouble yet to come. At two o'clock, as he stepped around the butt of the next pine to be felled, a copperhead struck at him. Only a remarkable agility saved him. Even then the snake's fangs scraped the shoe on his left foot. Dispatch-

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ing the snake with his ax, he had again that clammy feeling.

He sat down on a log to blow a while, and far away he heard the mournful notes of a rain crow. Sundry other little sounds ebbed and flowed in the gloomy woods. Then another sound. Sound of a man walking hurriedly, a big man who didn't mind crashing through the brush. Nick rose to his feet and peered down a ragged aisle in the underbrush. His cousin Scott Howard hove into view.

"You got to come to the house, Nick. Wayne's been hurt. Here, lemme ride that mule. I'm tard, coming all that way acrost them bluffs. You don't mind walking."

"What happened to Wayne?"

"That horse-trader, that Kirk Denby, like to of killed him. His left arm is broke and three of his ribs. Denby knocked him down five times, and then, when Wayne went for his knife, he grabbed Wayne up and slammed him into the side of a house. That's when he broke the arm and them ribs."

"Good lesson to him for drawing a knife," Nick said. "He couldn't take it when Denby sold him that mule and he couldn't take it when Denby, I reckon, was beating him fair and square."

Then, all of a sudden, remembrance came to him that Wayne was his brother. Memory of Wayne, an eight-year-old, taking him, a six-year-old, to the rabbit traps every morning. Wayne getting into fights about him during the short time they had gone to school. Wayne who was now lying over at the house with a broken arm and three broken ribs.

"Old jaybird meant business," he muttered.

"What you say?"

"Nothing. Get on that mule if you're too feeble to walk. I'm cutting acrost the bluffs. See you at the house."

When he reached home, Wayne was lying in bed. The other Howard, Flint, sat beside him, administering a dose of whisky. Both of them were already a little drunk.

"Yeh," Flint said, "the doc fixed him up in town—set his arm and so forth—and we brought him home. We'd been down to see the doc our ownselves 'bout that sore on Scott's hand."

"You hurt bad?" Nick asked his brother.

"What you think?" Wayne snapped. "If he hadn't of been so quick, I'd of cut his innards out and hung 'em round his neck."

Scott Howard entered the room and immediately availed himself of the alcoholic opportunity. His gaze ran round the room, settled at last upon Nick; hung there a moment, veered away, then came back.

"When you going, Nick?" he finally asked.

"Going? Going where? Where'm I s'posed to go?"

"Well, you ain't going to let your brother lay here crippled up 'thout doing something, are you?"

Nick understood then. It made no difference to them that Wayne had been clearly in the wrong. The important thing was that a man named Denby, a miserable dog of a horse-trader, had beaten up one of the fighting Tillars.

That was important.

"I ain't going," Nick said.

To the Howards Wayne said: "I told you that."

"Wayne," Nick said, "we're brothers. I'd do anything under that red sun for you—anything that was reasonable. But I ain't going to keep no quarrel going that hadn't ought to of been started in the first place."

"Sure," laughed Wayne. "I knew that all along. Better get back to your logging. That's all you're good for." Again he addressed the Howards: "Can't expect no more from him. Seen a little bitta fellow down at the crossroads one time back him clean down."

"I wouldn't hit him," Nick answered hotly. "He wasn't big enough. Might of killed him."

"Hanh!" said Wayne. "Ain't that a hell of an excuse?"

"You're the next of kin," Flint Howard said to Nick. "It's up to you—Wayne's your brother—but it looks like me and

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Scott have got to finish this job. Don't it, Scott?"

"I'm ready when you are," Scott said. "And me, I ain't trusting no knife. He ain't breaking no ribs for me. You don't have to get so clost with a little thirty-eight."

Nick knew they had him then, knew they meant what they said. In them this fierceness, this implacable instinct for revenge, was a legacy. Their mother had been a Tillar from the hills. No Tillar had ever passed up an insult or taken a beating without final recourse to knives or guns. His own mother had been a Varney and the Varneys were mild mannered. He was a Varney. Wayne and Scott and Flint were Tillars. He hated all three of them then, but, with their voices beating, beating, beating at him, he knew that finally he would do what they wanted. He always did. He was the one who gave orders about little trifling things, like cutting sawlogs; Wayne and the Howards called the turn on matters of importance.

"All right," he said, in a voice that traveled from a distant point and seemed spent and weary at the end of its journey.

WHEN Wayne Tillar left the woods that morning, his immediate thought concerned alcoholic refreshment. It seemed to him that he had been a long time dry. None of that slaving over pine logs all day. Leave that for fools like Nick. A man, a real man, craved and needed other things. So, on rapid feet, he negotiated the distance to Old Flem's. At Old Flem's he bought a pint of bootleg. The pint was three-fourths gone when he reached town and saw Kirk Denby, the horse-trader, walking along the street with a girl. In all his turbulent life he had never before made trouble in the presence of a woman, but now there was something tugging inside him, something straining to be freed. He looked at Virginia Burks, daughter of old man Burks who ran the corner grocery store, and he said: "Meaning no disrespect to you, ma'am, I was just wondering why your friend, 'stead of walking you up and down the street, didn't take you in the drug store and buy you an ice-cream soda with that money he gypped me out of."

Clearly he heard Denby say: "If you'll just excuse me a minute, Virgie, I've got something to talk over with this guy." Clearly he saw the girl clutch Denby's arm, then saw Denby free himself. Head up, but trembling, the girl passed on.

"Up this alley suit you?" Denby asked.

"Anywhere suits me," Wayne answered, and it was the fighting blood of all the fighting Tillars that spoke.

The fight was rather short. Wayne, in spite of his courage and his hard strength, was no match for the tall, lean Denby. In no time he knew that Denby, some time, somewhere, had been better than a fair boxer. The fifth time one of the horse trader's short, shocking blows drove him to the ground, he came up fumbling at his knife. And it was then that Denby, moving like a cat, sprang close and, seizing him in arms that were like white oak in their strength, flung him against the side of old man Burks' grocery store.

Denby walked away and left him lying there. At the corner he encountered the two Howards and to them he snapped a terse order: "Go up the alley and get your cousin. He maybe needs a doctor." After that he continued up the street until he overtook Virginia Burks and made his peace with her.

"A fellow's got to fight some time," he explained himself. "Now look up here and smile, because when I love a girl I sure do like to see her smile."

She gave him the requested smile and the horse-trader was once again completely happy. He walked jauntily beside the girl and his conversation was a continual flow of pleasant banter. When they had reached the Burks home they sat upon the shady side porch for over two hours; sat there, in fact, until they saw Nick Tillar open the front gate and come solidly up the walkway.

"I want to see you," Nick said to Denby. He had taken off his hat at sight of the Burks girl. Now, turning away, he still

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held it in his hand. Over his shoulder he repeated: "I want to see you."

Behind him he heard the girl say breathlessly to Denby: "No! You mustn't go. He's only a boy, for all his size. Please, Kirk!"

"I can't let him back me down," Denby told her, "whether he's just a boy or not. You don't—"

From the corner of his eye Nick saw the girl draw herself up, and he heard her say: "He's only come here with some crazy notion of revenge. All the Tillars are like that. You—you'll be fighting them the rest of your life, the way you've started now. Let me talk to him."

"That's hardly a woman's job," Denby answered briefly.

"If you keep this thing going by fighting Nick, I'll never speak to you again!"

Nick saw them standing there, two people whom he had for a long time secretly admired, saw them standing there tall and straight and tense. It seemed ages to him before Denby's voice came. When it did come it somehow left a chill in Nick's heart.

"All right, Virgie, if you're sure you mean that."

HE WHIRLED then and came straight at Nick. Side by side they traveled down the walkway. Behind them Nick had a picture of a slim girl who seemed all eyes as she watched them out of sight.

Denby said harshly: "Your brother and I fought in the alley. Maybe you and I'd better go somewhere else. The alley doesn't seem so lucky for the Tillars."

"Anywhere suits me," Nick said.

But the horse-trader, who was leading the way, did not enter the alley's mouth. Instead he continued down the dusty street until, having left the town behind, they found themselves on a grassy plot of ground surrounded by gloomy pine trees. He halted then and faced Nick, and Nick was aware once more of his admiration for this man. He was not afraid—a beating, one way or the other, meant nothing to him—yet he was acutely conscious of a sense of shame. He was about to do something wholly typical of the reckless, fighting Tillars. Once again had the will of his brother and cousins had its way with him. Always they got what they wanted where he was concerned.

The horse-trader spoke to him and the harshness had gone out of his voice, replaced by a gentle softness. "Why do you want to fight me, Nick?"

The awakened Tillar in him replied instantly: "You licked my brother. Now see can you lick me!"

"I fought him fair and square," Denby said patiently, "till he went and pulled a knife. You got no call to butt in, Nick. Hell, I always liked you. Seemed you had more sense than the others. I don't want to have to whip you."

"You ain't done that yet," Nick answered doggedly. "Pull off your coat, and if it'll ease your mind there won't be no knife drawed by me."

"I know that," said Denby. "You'll fight clean. That's one reason I hate to do this." He gave Nick a long, puzzled look. "So you're here to get revenge on me. Ever think that's the way quarrels and feuds start? I ever do anything to you, Nick?" After a long moment's pause he added: "If I fight you, Nick, I expect I'll have done lost my girl."

"I ain't inter'sted in what you lose. If you want to use that for an excuse to get out of—"

Sudden fire flamed in the horse-trader's cheeks. With a curt "All right" he cut short Nick's sentence. His coat came off and was pitched twenty feet away. As agile as a dancer, he advanced to meet the waiting Nick.

For all the years of his life Nick was to remember that fight and marvel at it. He himself struck the first blow, a lunging right-hand drive that glanced off the horse trader's quickly lifted shoulder. Then the horse trader's fists were in his face, playing upon that face like twin hammers. Swinging wildly, he found only empty air with his own fists. Denby knocked him to his knees. As he came groping up he tried

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to clinch and the horse-trader almost broke his neck with a swishing downward blow.

He fell flat but regained his feet instantly. Through a kind of murk he could see Denby's calm face. It infuriated him. Gone was his feeling of admiration. Lunging recklessly forward, he took a straight right-hand blow that dropped him to the ground again. When he stumbled up this time, something seemed to have gone wrong with his knees.

Out of somewhere came the horse-trader's voice. "Better call it off, Nick. Wayne's not worth it."

He cursed Denby then, shouted: "I'll fight till I die!" As he plunged forward again he glimpsed a strange expression in the other man's eyes. It could have been merely wonder, it could have been a reluctant admiration. But he wasted no time puzzling over it, for now his fists had found the range. They drummed against Denby's face. Two hard ones to the jaw, one high up on the temple, a smash to the mouth, then two more crushing jolts to the jaw.

The horse-trader was lying on the ground. He lay there as if he never intended to move again. Blood trickled out of his mouth. Above him Nick swayed.

"Go ahead and kick me, Tillar," Denby said. "Go ahead and kick me in the belly."

"Stand up and fight," Nick told him.

"No," said the horse-trader, and again: "No. I've had enough. You can go back and tell the boys you did something your brother couldn't do. I hope it'll do you lots of good—Nick."

He was walking up the road now, walking back to town. His senses had begun to clear. They seemed to be trying to tell him something, insistent little voices tapping at his brain. Finally he could hear them, though still indistinctly. They seemed saying: 'Something wrong back there. Beating you. Playing with you."

He caught it then and snapped erect. He wiped the last trickle of blood from his battered face. He set a straight course and followed it with all the dogged, stubborn determination that was in him.

WHEN the Burks girl opened the door, he swept off his hat and met her eyes squarely. Curiously he was not, as he had been in the old days, afraid of her. He said: "I'd like to tell you something, ma'am. I—well, I heard you tell Mr. Denby that if him and me fought you'd never speak to him ag'in."

"Well?"

"We fought, ma'am, and he was beating me—'scuse me, ma'am—he was beating hell out of me. Then, all at onct, he wasn't beating me no more. I was lamming—scuse me ag'in, ma'am—I was lamming hell out of him. When I knocked him down, he said he had enough. I thought he didn't have no—I mean I thought he was afeared. But I know different now. I know that Mr. Denby taken pity on me and let me whip him."

He paused now, and there seemed nothing else to say. He'd done his best for Denby. What if that wasn't enough? It had to be! If only he could make her understand! But he wasn't any great shakes of a talker and words came hard with him.

Lamely he concluded: "I thought maybe you'd like to know."

Something fine and sweet and lovely came suddenly into her eyes. To Nick's everlasting surprise she flung both arms around his neck and kissed his bruised right cheek. Her voice reached his dizzy ears with all the sweetness of a distant tinkling cowbell in summer twilight.

"I expect maybe I would like to know, Nick." Then: "If you see him again—why, tell him I want to see him."

After that he took his leave. But it was not until he was once more on the street that it occurred to him that this business was not completely ended; at least not ended in the right way. He swung into a left turn, following a road that presently led him to the horse-trader's house. In the pasture adjacent to the barn Denby's current string of stock fed contentedly. Idly, for a moment, Nick watched them, then went to sit upon the back steps.

He was sitting there when the horse-

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trader came round the corner of the house.

"You again?" Denby said. "Not satisfied, are you?"

Nick stood up. This was where he had to play his cards carefully, where he couldn't afford to make a misstep. He squared off belligerently. He snapped the words out of his mouth.

"You right I ain't satisfied. When I fight a man I like for him to stand up and fight like a man. I don't want to see him crawling on his belly. You quit on me, you stinking polecat."

The horse-trader was something beautiful to watch as he came out of his coat. His muscles flowed and rippled. A blazing fire flared in his eyes. Nick swung viciously. The next instant he was flat on his back. When he came up, Denby knocked him down again. He stumbled back to his feet and met a right hand that all but paralyzed him.

"I got enough," he said from his position on the ground. "Kick me in the belly if you want to."

"Get off this place," the horse-trader said, "before I kill you. Get up and get off—and stay off."

Nick rose slowly, gingerly feeling his half-wrecked face. He took an experimental step or two, halted at the corner of the house to wipe the fresh blood from his mouth. Swaying there, he addressed the horse-trader.

"Happened to see your gal in town. Said for you to come and see her. Sounded like—"

"Wait, Nick, What is this? Wait!"

"Aw, you go to hell," Nick said, almost affectionately, and kept walking.

Swinging along the dusty road in the twilight, he was conscious of a sense of well-being. His body ached and his features shrank at the touch of his fingers. Still, that feeling persisted. Far away a cow lowed and he hearkened to the pleasant sound. A bird skimmed gracefully up the road ahead of him and with interest he watched its flight; it was almost as beautiful as the horse-trader swinging into action. And the afterglow in the western sky reminded him of the smile on the Burks girl's face when he told her what the horse-trader had done.

HIS sense of satisfaction with himself mounted as he climbed the knoll to the Tillar house. A light burned in the bedroom. He entered without knocking. The two Howards rose instantly. In the bed Wayne Tillar sat up to regard him with quick, probing eyes.

"What happened?" Scott Howard asked, after a long moment of silent query.

"Oh," said Nick, "I licked him, then he turned around and licked me."

"And how did that happen?" Flint Howard demanded.

"That," Nick told him casually, "is for me to know and you to find out."

He grinned at them and was pleasantly aware of their puzzlement. Rolling a cigarette, he regarded them with lazy eyes, waiting. A thousand questions trembled at the tips of their tongues, yet they did not speak. They were like men in the presence of something utterly new and strange. Nick puffed slowly on the cigarette, leaning against the door and blowing languid wreaths of smoke.

"Boys," he said at last, breaking the heavy silence, "things are going to be different. Wayne, son, hurry up and get over that broken arm and them broken ribs. I'm going to need you a lot round this place. There's a thing called work I want to introduce you to." Before a one of them could speak, he whirled on his cousins. "Scott, you and Flint git up and git. You heard me. Move!"

They moved, but it was in his direction. He had been expecting this and hoping for it. Almost as agilely as the horse-trader, he ducked under Flint's arm and gave him an uppercut. Whirling, he drove a one-two to Scott's jaw. His momentum carried him to the fireplace and he came away from it with a three-foot poker in his hand.

To the Howards he must have seemed rather terrible, standing there brandishing that piece of iron. He swung it to and fro

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in front of him. Suddenly he whirled it over his head, and they saw in his eyes a controlled but deadly fury. For the first time in their reckless lives, they listened to caution.

They fled. . . .

Nick stood a long time in the doorway, intent on their retreating footsteps. When he turned he let his eyes fall full and sharp upon the man in the bed. There was nothing either hard or soft in his face as he regarded his brother; there was only a cool and solid determination.

"That's the way it's got to be, Wayne. Suit you?"

"Anything has got to suit a crippled-up man."

"The hell-raising is over. Understand, Wayne?" He held his brother's eyes, held them coolly, competently, just as if he had been doing it all his life. For what seemed ages they stared at each other, and finally into those eyes of Wayne's crept surrender and with it the tribute of respect.

"I reckon I understand," said Wayne.

Nick went outside. A big moon came sailing over the hills to the east. A warm breeze fluttered the foliage of the trees and soothed his hot forehead. Standing there in the darkness, he seemed to feel himself, expanding, growing, like a lusty young pine tree in the springtime. Maybe he wasn't a man yet, but he was on the way.

Exit the Saint Bernards

IN this last year of war and burned libraries there has been no greater wrench of tradition than the banishment of the Saint Bernards from the Alps. Condemned because of the death of a child months ago, the great dogs were confined in the celebrated Saint Bernard monastery; now they have been deported, sent from their Swiss home to a lamasery in the Himalayas where they will roam the mountains again with their first-aid packs.

It has been a sad and difficult time for Brother Cyrille, the guardian of the dogs at Saint Bernard. The death of the child was a tragic accident, he insists; she had fallen so the dogs could not see her, and they thought they were attacking prey. But his charges were denied their duty and their liberty; they were imprisoned in a huge cage, and the tourists came to peer at these discredited heroes who had for generations tended the travelers in the Alps.

Brother Cyrille is a man of great age, but when he learned that the Tibetan monks desired the services of his dogs, he applied at once to his prior for permission to deliver the Saint Bernards. His request was granted. By now he has probably set out for the refuge near Lhasa in Tibet. There the Saint Bernards will be let free, and in that alien land they will be permitted to bury their disgrace under a new record of lives saved. On the lonely slopes of the Himalayas the Swiss exiles will recover their name.

—*Augustus Harden.*

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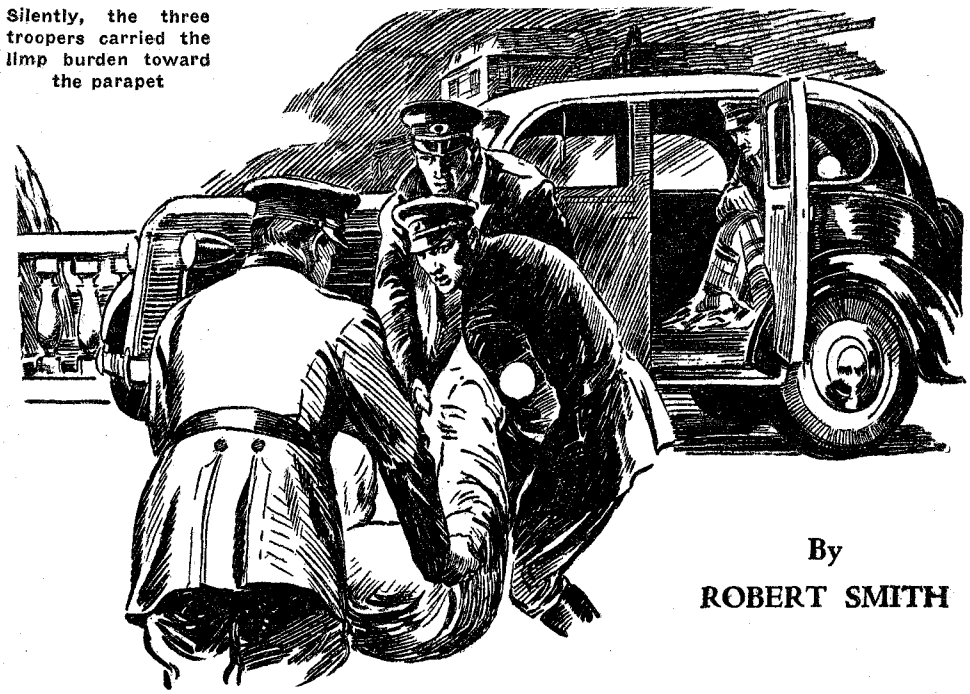

Silently, the three troopers carried the limp burden toward the parapet

By
ROBERT SMITH

The Man with the Magic Face

DESMONA THE GREAT was the cleverest mimic in all of Europe—by voice, facial expression and expertness of makeup he could bring to life such variegated personalities as Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, Edward of Windsor and Emil Jannings. He celebrated his fortieth birthday with a triumphal performance in the capital of a Central European nation in the company of his pretty, light-minded wife, Vera. And the events of that night set the stage in preparation for his most astonishing impersonation.

Vera's head is turned by the attentions of "Handsome Heinrich," the dictator-ruler of the nation. When he seeks to interfere in the Leader's newest romance, Desmona is thrown into a concentration camp, where, weeks later, he reads a newspaper account of Vera's suicide and his own "disappearance." For this he vows vengeance not only on Handsome Heinrich but upon the whole nation that has blindly followed him; for unless the people is destroyed, Desmona believes, any other plausible-tongued rascal will be able to take the Leader's place when he is killed. And for this mass-revenge, Desmona has already conceived a plan.

HE ESCAPES from the concentration camp and, playing his cards with care and intelligence, worms his way into the Palace and a position as the Leader's valet. For months he studies Heinrich's voice, his gestures, his tricks of speech, his moods. He keeps a notebook filled with the minutest information on all of Heinrich's cabinet, his officers, his ministry, his associates. He perfects a makeup exactly duplicating Handsome Heinrich's Hitleresque features.

And the moment arrives.

Desmona, dressed in the Dictator's clothes, corners Heinrich, tells him who he is and what he plans to do. He pulls a gun. The two men—identical twins—struggle. There is a

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shot. Another. And then from the floor, one man rises, staring down at the other man sprawled on the carpet, turning upward a face the exact counterpart of his own. . . .

CHAPTER X

THE DAY OF DESTINY

THE sound of knocking became more insistent. The Dictator looked down at the dead body at his feet, rubbed his knuckles over his eyebrow characteristically, came to a decision, and crossed to the door.

He opened it a crack and peered out. The two members of his bodyguard looked frightened.

"Are you all right, Excellency?" the taller man asked anxiously.

"There has been an accident," he whispered in reply. "Rudolph, get me a heavy canvas tarpaulin, rope and lead weights. Bring them here as quickly as possible.

"Max," he continued, "will stay here. Above all do not speak to a soul, either of you. And, Max, you will permit no one to approach."

He closed the door and walked directly across the room to the wardrobe. There he picked up the valet's discarded clothes and, returning to the body, stripped the uniform from it and dressed it clumsily in the valet's suit.

He took a pillow case from the bed and stuffed it with the bloody uniform. Then he saw the blood on his hands and went into the bathroom to wash them clean, and to bring certain things back with him. Five minutes later the dead body was beardless and lying face downward on the carpet with its spreading red stain.

Satisfied by now, he picked up the telephone and ordered his limousine brought to the servants' entrance. Then he lighted a cigarette and calmly sat down in a chair to await Rudolph's return.

Again a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," he called, and arose to meet the two men.

The moment they entered the room they saw the body on the floor and gazed at it in startled wonder.

"Karl tried to assassinate me," the Dictator explained to them. "Fortunately I was able to wrest his gun from him and shoot him instead.

"This is a bad affair," he continued, "You must never speak of it to a living soul. It would not be well for the people to know that anyone would want to kill Heinrich. Come, spread the tarpaulin beside the body."

Max and Rudolph laid the tarpaulin on the floor at Heinrich's command. They lifted the body, still face downward, and placed it on the canvas. The pillow slip, with its bloody uniform inside, was placed on the dead man's feet and heavy lead weights were added at top and bottom.

With his own hands the Dictator pulled the canvas over the dead man and roped it securely in place.

"The body must be disposed of in secret," he explained to the members of his bodyguard. "You will carry it to the servants' entrance."

Max and Rudolph awkwardly shouldered the tarpaulin and, staggering under its weight, followed the Dictator through the wardrobe room and down the back stairway. At the servants' entrance a green-shirted sentry gazed in open-mouthed wonder at the strange procession.

The canvas-wrapped body was silently bundled into the rear of the car and the limousine shifted gears and slowly pulled forward.

"To Prinzen Bridge." Heinrich ordered the chauffeur.

Roen Strasse was quiet and deserted as the limousine approached the bridge. It stopped, and Heinrich looked down at the muddy waters of the Prese, while the three men tugged and pulled and hauled at the heavy tarpaulin shroud.

"In with it!" he ordered sharply. The three men lifted their burden slowly to the railing and then it was gone, plunging down, down, down, until it hit the water with a mighty splash and disappeared beneath the surface with only the swelling circles on the river to serve as a gravestone.

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"I DO not know what it is we are coming to," complained Herr Kohner to Berg, the chauffeur. "Vogel is here no more. What happened to him no one knows. He did not so much as come to say goodbye to me. And our Heinrich insists he wants no valet at all any longer."

"And the dashing Captain Wenrich is an ambassador now, eh, Herr Kohner?" said the chauffeur.

"Yes, but that is only the beginning of it," continued Herr Albert. "Von Womrath has been placed in concentration camp. Why, nobody knows. Bauer is dead and the rumor is that Grafnitz, who takes his place, shot him with his own revolver. And old General Liebdorf has been retired. Our Heinrich has refused to so much as talk to him. As for the new Minister of War, Mueller, he was no more than a brigadier until last month.

"Do not mention this to anyone, Herr Kohner, but I am told there was an attempt to assassinate Heinrich in this very building. One of the chauffeurs tells a story of Our Leader and Max and Rudolph carrying a body from the Palace in the dead of night."

"You do not say?" ejaculated the old major domo. "Well perhaps that would explain everything. There may have been a plot that our Heinrich foiled. Still I cannot believe that Vogel had anything to do with it. A fine fellow, that Vogel."

"You never can tell about anybody these days," said Schmidt, wagging his head. "One thing is certain. Our Heinrich's new advisors are all strangers to me, men I have never seen at the Palace before."

"Yes, there are many strangers," Kohner agreed. "Even our Heinrich seems strange, somehow, these days. Tell me, Berg, have you not observed that he is different lately?"

"There is something in what you say, Herr Kohner, Our Heinrich looks older, suddenly, and his manner is not the same. Perhaps the attempted assassination has unnerved him."

"That may be the case," agreed the major domo. "Then again there may be grave plans under way. Have you heard about the death ray?"

"Only rumors. They say it will clear a path a kilometer wide and twenty kilos deep and that one has but to touch a button and every living thing in that area will be destroyed."

"So? Those dirty Communists had better beware, eh?"

"And not only the Communists," suggested Schmidt.

"Ours is not a nation to remain conquered for long," said Kohner, proudly. "We will show them all some of these days, eh, my friend?"

* * *

THE great plane floated calmly above the North Sea while gray wisps of smoke raced past the cabin window. To any but a seasoned flyer it would have seemed incredible that the ship was turning two hundred and forty miles an hour and the smoke was the bottom edge of a fleecy cloud.

"I say. There's England dead ahead."

"Quite so, Jerry," said Lord Sutphen.

"Good to see the old place again, eh, what?"

"It would be if a chap could stay there, Jerry. The Heinrich fellow is a bit too much of a thug for my liking," confessed His Lordship, wearily.

"Will we be flying back tomorrow? I'd like to drive out to Devon and see the gov'nor if there's time."

"We'll know better when Downing Street gets through with us tonight. The old boy's got the wind up."

"I say, Your Lordship, do you s'pose it's the death ray thing that worries him? D'ya think there's anything to all that tosh we've been hearin'?"

"Dunno, Jerry. Meanwhile you'd best keep the lip buttoned up. No loose talk, mind you," Sutphen warned.

"A chap was tellin' me they press a button and it kills everything within ten miles. Claims he saw thousands of hares lyin' dead with not a mark on 'em."

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"Best not repeat that, Jerry. Risin' young men in the diplomatic service do well to keep the tongue closely between the teeth. Necess'ry, you know."

"Look! There's the Thames. Good old Thames. Like to be on it in a punt one day."

"We'll be comin' into Croydon in half a moment now," said Sutphen.

The huge plane pointed its nose downward and England rose to meet it. The flying field rushed closer and expanded, simultaneously, and then the wheels were on the ground and they could hear the field siren's scream above the noise of the motor. The plane wheeled smartly to, in front of the depot building, and mechanics rushed up with wheel blocks and a rolling stairway.

The young secretary picked up the two bags, tucked a briefcase under his arm and followed the ambassador out of the cabin. He found Sutphen in the stairway, surrounded by Fleet Street men.

"I say, Your Lordship, is it true that the prime minister sent for you?" came a voice from the group.

"Nothin' to say now, gentlemen. Sorry."

"What about this death ray business, Your Lordship?"

"Sorry, gentlemen, can't talk to you now."

Sutphen pushed his way through the reporters, followed by his secretary. Cameras clicked and men shouted more questions, but the ambassador waved them away and entered a big touring car. When it was under way he breathed a hugh sigh of relief.

"These reporter fellows. Always asking questions," he complained. "Have to answer enough of them when we come to Downing Street."

* * *

THE eagle that hung above the speaker's desk was twenty feet high and its wings spread almost the full width of the hall. Its beak was hooked cruelly and its eyes were cold and merciless; the talons gripped a large wreath ornamented with the cabalistic sign that was the emblem of the ruling political party.

Beneath it stretched three tiers, extending from wall to wall. On the top row sat two lines of brilliantly uniformed military leaders, the second row held cabinet members in civilian attire, the bottom level was green with the shirts of the troopers.

The three flyers looked down on the floor of Parliament. Here sat hundreds of Heinrich's rubber stamps, eager to raise their arms in salute and vote their *"Ja"* on their leader's legislative proposals. It was possible, of course, to vote *"Nein"*—possible but unhealthy. No member of this Parliament had ever voted "No" yet, so one could not know definitely, what the consequences of such a vote might be. But one could imagine.

Today the gallery at the far end was filled with foreign diplomats and their staffs for this was the occasion of the Dictator's annual message to his legislators.

They rose to their feet with a roar of approval, arms high in salute, as Heinrich entered the room and walked to the battery of microphones.

The French ambassador twisted nervously in his seat but Yamamura Osaki, from Japan, sat motionless and impassive, his hands folded and still in his lap, as the din subsided and Heinrich began to talk.

"Leaders of a noble race, I salute you," the Dictator began.

Frantic applause, mingled with cries of "Hail Heinrich," arose from the auditorium.

"Today marks an end and a beginning," he continued. "My first task, when I took power, was to restore to this nation its equality with every other sovereign nation on the face of the globe. That purpose has been fulfilled, that task has reached its end."

The audience cheered wildly.

"It is now our purpose and our destiny to take our rightful place of world lead-

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ership, the place to which we are entitled by our culture, our power and our superior system of government. That task we begin today. Let those who attempt to stand in our path beware!"

A hoarse shout rose from the floor of Parliament.

"D'ya hear that?" Jerry whispered excitedly to Lord Sutphen.

The ambassador leaned forward, motioning his secretary to silence.

"For three years we have been pulling our belts tighter and tighter," continued Heinrich, when the clamor had subsided. "As loyal citizens you have made every sacrifice for the Fatherland. Today your sacrifices meet their just reward. While the citizens of other nations quarrel among themselves, while they hesitate and procrastinate for lack of the strong leadership I have given you, our country stands united, seventy million people working and acting as one, seventy million fervent patriots who today can exult in the fact that I now officially proclaim our armies and our air forces the mightiest in the world!"

A great animal-like cry poured from hundreds of throats. Men shouted and screamed and leaped to their feet. Arms high in salute.

"Hail Heinrich."

The Dictator motioned for quiet in one sweeping imperious gesture.

"And so we come to the beginning," Heinrich cried, his eyes flashing, "Let those rule who have proved their ability to rule. Today we shall begin to extend the benefits of strong and orderly government to the peoples of all the earth."

A shocked silence fell upon the ranks of the diplomats in the gallery.

"First we turn to the north," cried Heinrich. "Let the great wheat fields of the Ukraine and the vast mineral wealth of the Urals be placed in the hands of a government that knows how to use them."

The legislators on the floor of Parliament howled mad approval. Even the generals in the top tier shouted their excitement.

"It is my plan to wipe Communism from the face of the earth, once and for all, to destroy forever the ugly menace of the Bolshevists!"

Again he stilled his audience with a gesture.

"And let any nation that thinks of interfering proceed cautiously. We will tolerate no hindrance to our mighty destiny. To submit gracefully is the only path that sensibly remains to our enemies!"

"Is the man declaring war on the whole world?" Sutphen's secretary shouted above the uproar.

"Wait, Jerry," the ambassador answered, none too calmly. "He has something up his sleeve. Either that or he's gone insane."

Heinrich stood on the daïs, chin high, eyes flashing, while the tumult subsided. "But out of the generosity of our hearts we shall spare the world bloodshed," Heinrich continued. A hushed silence fell on the room.

"Our brains and our skill have produced a weapon of war so all-powerful that none will dare dispute us. Yet we shall have mercy on all nations. Because before we employ that weapon I will invite the representatives of all the countries of the world to witness a demonstration of this terrible death-dealing instrument one week from today. And that demonstration will be so clear that to attend it will show, once and for all, the futility of opposing our will.

"Nations of the world I call you to view the death ray!

"Citizens, I here and now summon you to your nation's mighty destiny. Where Greece tried and failed, where Rome tried and failed, where Bolshevism has tried and failed, *we shall succeed.* Today we stand the mightiest nation in all the world. Tomorrow we rule it!"

Every man on the floor of the Parliament was on his feet. Cries of triumph flooded the room but Heinrich stood, cold and impassive, until the demonstration had worn itself out.

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"To the rulers of the world I issue this grave warning. Take no unfriendly step or I will turn the death ray upon you and destroy you. Do not make the fatal mistake of disbelieving me. Send your representatives to us immediately and one week from today you will see for yourself and with your own eyes. Wait until then calmly and without action, or yours will be the responsibility of the bloodshed.

"To the people of the world I bring this message. Within the month I will carry to all lands the benefits of orderly and efficient government, the same government that has made this country the mightiest in the world and has brought it to its present position as ruler of the world.

"To the people of our own land I declare a national holiday for one week. Exult and rejoice, my comrades.

"To all political prisoners in the concentration camps I celebrate our world leadership by extending an amnesty. They will be released immediately and deported before the week is ended.

"To the members of this Parliament, I say five words. Prepare to rule the world!"

For a split second there was a hushed silence in the vast room and then bedlam broke loose. Men screamed hysterically and great cries of "Heinrich, Heinrich. Hail Heinrich!" rose from the floor.

The English ambassador said, "Come Jerry," and hurried out of the building and back to the embassy where he called London on the telephone.

The French ambassador called Paris and the United States ambassador called Washington.

In a small hotel on Lanzinger Strasse a tall, saturnine Russian in workmen's clothes turned off his radio and spoke rapidly in his native tongue.

The three men with him looked grave and worried. "But Stepanoff," one of them protested, "you can't assassinate Heinrich if you can't get near him."

"Nevertheless he must die before next Tuesday," Stepanoff insisted. "And one of us will die with him."

The three men looked at their leader expectantly.

"There is a satchel in my closet with enough explosive in it to blow up the entire Palace. One of us must carry it there and set it off. We will draw straws for the privilege."

He smiled coldly as he pronounced the last word.

"But suppose we kill Heinrich," the first speaker protested. "What good will that do?"

"None at all, my friends," came a voice from the doorway.

The four men swung around as one.

"You will put your hands up," continued the man with the green shirt, entering the room. "The game is over Stepanoff."

Troopers poured into the room. There was no time nor opportunity for resistance.

Stepanoff tried to reach his pocket but the butt end of a revolver felled him instantly. The other three men stood passively, resigned to their fate.

CHAPTER XI

UNMASK AT MIDNIGHT

I SAT in my room smoking my fiftieth cigarette of the evening and gazing stupidly at my typewriter. I had written ten thousand words since five o'clock and the keys were beginning to sway from side to side under my eyes. I should be excited, I reflected, being right on the spot where it was happening and covering what was, unquestionably, the biggest single news story in the history of the world. But instead of excitement all I felt was a weary numbness, a headache, and the taste of too many cigarettes on an empty stomach.

Tuesday Heinrich could demonstrate his death ray or turn it on the whole damned world, for all I cared, but meanwhile all I was looking forward to was something to eat and a bed. I cursed the telephone company for not having more transatlantic wires. If I had been able

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to get a line I could have phoned the whole story in to the *Chronicle* instead of depending on the cable. And Lord knew how much of my ten thousand words would get by the censor. Maybe none of it at all. Even if he passed the story I had no way of knowing whether the cable could handle it. Everybody in the country was cabling America tonight and I didn't see how they could transmit the press stuff alone.

I ought to be trotting over to the embassy, I reflected, to see the ambassador. Probably he wouldn't have anything to say but I really should make some kind of an effort.

I picked up the first page of my story and cursed the lead paragraph for the flabby thing it was. I never could write and I never would be able to. I was nothing more than a damned leg-man. Look at the junk I had before me.

"Nations shiver with fright, rulers stand in fear and trembling, the common people of every land gaze at each other in despair tonight as the news comes over radio, telephone, cable and telegraph that Heinrich, the dread Dictator whose shadow has cast a pall over all Europe for many months, today announced to his Parliament the perfection of the most dreadful weapon of war ever known to mankind and his determination to use that weapon to conquer the world. At 4 o'clock today Heinrich summoned all nations to witness a demonstration next Tuesday of the terrible death ray, reputed to kill everything in its path for a hundred miles by a single touch of the finger on a button, and announced that after witnessing the demonstration a peaceful submission to his will was the world's only alternative to complete annihilation."

"Lousy," I growled to myself and lit my fifty-first cigarette as a knock sounded at the door.

A gaudily uniformed army officer entered. "You are Herr Martin?" he inquired.

"That's right," I agreed.

"Herr Alec Martin of the New York *Chronicle?*"

"Check."

"Herr Martin," he informed me importantly, "Our Heinrich will grant you an audience Monday evening at seven."

I nearly fell out of my chair. "Me? Are you sure he wants me?"

"I was told to summon Herr Alec Martin of the New York *Chronicle,*" he replied.

"What is it, a general press conference?" I asked.

"My understanding is that Our Heinrich wants to speak to you alone," he answered.

I don't often talk to myself out loud but this time I said, in great wonderment, "Well, I'll be damned," as I watched the door close behind my officer.

* * *

LIGHTS were burning late in the Palace. In the Dictator's bedroom two men were arguing heatedly.

"But, Excellency," protested the man in uniform, "as head of the army surely I should know every detail concerning our greatest weapon. Why would you appoint me to so high an office if you do not trust me?"

Heinrich laughed. "My dear Mueller, I trust no one."

"Then, Excellency, I must beg leave to present my resignation."

"Now, now, General Mueller, let me hear no more of such foolishness. You can safely leave these affairs in my hands. We must have no dissension at such a time."

"Nevertheless, if I am to head the army I must know every detail of our strength. I must refuse to be kept in darkness any longer, your Excellency."

"Refuse? Did you say refuse, Mueller?" asked the Dictator icily.

"*Ja!* Those were my words," said the general stubbornly.

"Do you not find your present office more congenial than being only a brigadier, Mueller?"

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"That is beside the point, Your Excellency."

"Then may I remind you," said Heinrich coldly, "that even being a brigadier is better than being a corpse." The Dictator's voice rose angrily. "No more of this nonsense," he shouted, "I will brook no interference from anyone. You will see the death ray Tuesday, Mueller, not before!"

His voice dropped to a calmer tone.

"Accept my orders, Herr General," he said placatingly. "Behind my action there are reasons of state beyond the comprehension of an army officer. Leave these matters to my own judgment."

Mueller shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "As you say, Excellency. Nevertheless I do not understand it."

The general hoisted his huge bulk from the chair and prepared to leave Heinrich took him by the arm and spoke in a friendlier vein.

"Mueller, your name will go down in history with Caesar and Napoleon. You will be the leader of the army that conquers the entire world. Surely that is enough glory for any man. Leave the rest to me."

As Heinrich closed the door behind the general and turned back toward the bed he was startled to see that he was not alone.

"Wenrich," he exclaimed, "how did you get in here?"

"Through the wardrobe room door," Fritz replied. "I kept my key to it."

"But what are you doing here? I sent you to Roumania," said the Dictator, angrily.

"Dear Heinrich, I decided that being an ambassador was too enervating a task," replied Fritz. "I missed the pleasant days we once spent together. Do you remember that blonde dancer from the ballet?"

"Yes! Yes!" said Heinrich, impatiently. "But this is no time for women. There is important work to do."

"And the little Gretchen from Vienna, ah, there was a charmer for you," presisted Wenrich.

"And if she was," growled the Dictator, "Does that excuse you for leaving your post?"

"My dear Heinrich, you are becoming too serious-minded. You need me around to keep you amused."

"Fritz, you are impertinent," shouted Heinrich angrily.

"Ah, but I was always impertinent. By the way, Heinrich, when did you grow that mole on the back of your neck?"

"Mole? On my neck, you say?" the Dictator's hand went up automatically.

"Oh, excellent," said Wenrich lightly. "And now that your hand is there don't drop it down again."

A snub-nosed Lüger glittered in his fingers.

"The blonde dancer from the ballet. The Gretchen from Vienna. You remember them well, eh?" said Wenrich.

The Dictator did not take his eyes off the other man's gun. "What is this nonsense, Fritz?" he demanded.

"Only that they do not exist," Wenrich replied. "I never forget a face, you know. Sometimes I remember right away and sometimes later—but I never forget a face.

"You are not Heinrich," he continued. "You are not Karl, the valet." His face shone with excitement as he took a step forward, the gun held menacingly before him.

"Keep your hands high," he cried, "I know you now. You are that actor fellow with the pretty wife, Desmona!"

CHAPTER XII

MONDAY IS CRIMSON

TWO members of Heinrich's bodyguard sat in the small anteroom just outside his bedroom. "An easy job, this one, eh?" said Wolfgang, loosening his tie and unbuttoning the collar of his green shirt.

"Not bad at all," answered Dirk. He waved a cigarette in a gesture of contentment. "Good food. Little work. Double wages. Sometimes I think I would not trade places with Heinrich himself."

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"That fellow Vogel did us a favor when he tried to murder Our Heinrich, eh?" said Wolfgang.

"A favor? How is that?"

"Why, if he hadn't pulled a gun on Heinrich the old bodyguard would never have been discharged and we would not be here at all."

"No one will get near Heinrich while I'm here," said Dirk, darkly.

The two men smoked in silence for a minute. Suddenly Dirk sprang to his feet and, crossing to the door, listened intently at the keyhole.

"What is it?" whispered Wolfgang.

"It seems to me I hear voices," answered the man at the door, quietly, "I thought he was alone when Mueller came out."

Wolfgang joined his companion at the door and listened carefully. Then he nodded his head in assent.

"Someone is in there," he whispered.

Dirk frowned and looked puzzled.

"I think I will open the door just a trifle and see who it is. It worries me."

He took hold of the knob and turned it slowly and soundlessly to the right. The door opened an inch or two and he peered into the bedroom.

What he saw sent his hand instantly to the holster of his automatic. So slowly and cautiously that not a sound could be heard, he pushed the door fully open and slid his gun out of its holster.

Not ten feet in front of him, back to the door, stood a man in military uniform, gun in hand, and facing him was Heinrich with both arms upraised.

A gleam of hope crossed the Dictator's face as he saw Dirk in the doorway and he nodded his head, almost imperceptibly.

Captain Wenrich laughed aloud.

"I am too old a hand to be taken in by that ancient trick," he sneered. "When I turn around to see who is behind me you hope to leap at me, eh?" Wenrich advanced a pace and pointed his gun squarely at the Dictator's heart. "Well, disillusion yourself," he continued. "No one is behind me and I will not turn my head."

Dirk silently raised his automatic and aimed carefully. . . .

There was a roar and acrid smoke twisted up toward the ceiling. The expression on Wenrich's face never changed. He spun on his heel and pitched to the floor, face downward.

Dirk and Wolfgang emptied their automatics into the body needlessly for the first bullet had smashed in the back of Wenrich's brain and he was dead before he could hear the sound of the shot.

The Dictator, his face white as milk, looked down at the fallen body and groped in his pocket for a cigarette. He drew it out and lit it with trembling fingers, and not until he had drawn a cloud of smoke deep into his lungs did he speak.

"That was well done," he said, at last, "I compliment you on your vigilance."

He dropped his cigarette on the carpet and crushed it beneath his heel before he knelt beside the fallen man and commenced to systematically empty his pockets. There were keys and a handkerchief, a stub of pencil and a well-filled billfold but nothing to show that Captain Wenrich knew that Desmona, and not Heinrich, had become the nation's Dictator.

Satisfied, he tossed the billfold to Dirk.

"You may divide the money between you," he said calmly. "The captain no longer has use for it."

The two men stammered their thanks.

"You had better take this"—his toe indicated Captain Wenrich's body—"down the back stairway and dispose of it as quietly as possible. And I will see that you are well rewarded for this evening's work."

When the men had shouldered their burden and left the room, Desmona stood for a long time watching the red stain widen on the carpet and then he walked to the telephone and placed a call. It was time for his last move.

THAT last week was the dizziest, most incredible seven days of my life. As I look back on it now I am still not sure

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whether it really happened or whether I dreamed it from drinking too many glasses of champagne with Bock beer chasers. I've always been fond of the bubbly water and with lots of American dollars in my pocket and no certainty that they would be worth anything after Heinrich's death ray demonstration, I decided that I might as well drink champagne instead of water.

I remember when I was a boy I would sometimes dream that I had a stick of candy and then, in the middle of the dream would come the consciousness that I was dreaming. When that happened I would eat the candy fast, before I could wake up and lose it.

That was the way I drank champagne that last week, and while the world was distorted enough during thise wild days it must have looked even stranger than it really was, after the tenth magnum of Mumm's extra dry.

The city was alive with the most fantastic rumors and there was a cable from the *Chronicle* every fifteen minutes asking me to run down some of the weirdest tales ever invented by the fevered imagination of a newspaper editor.

Heinrich was marching on London. Stalin had abdicated. Greta Garbo had organized a battalion of women troops in Sweden (I cabled back "So what?" when I got that one.) Mussolini had combined forces with Heinrich. Hitler had announced a hands off policy. Mussolini was about to declare war on Heinrich. Hitler was about to declare war on the Aleutian Islands. Mussolini had entered a monastery. Hitler had joined him.

Weird as some of these rumors were, the Dictator's actual actions were almost as strange. He announced a great mass meeting at the National Opera House for Monday night at nine o'clock. That was the night before the death ray demonstration and the very evening of my interview.

All the cabinet heads, members of parliament, generals, admiral, industrialists and bankers were summoned to attend, and an entertainment had been arranged to precede Heinrich's speech. Henline, who was one of the political prisoners released from Spandau, through the Dictator's recent amnesty, was scheduled to conduct a two hundred piece symphony orchestra, and an all-star vaudeville show had been assembled, headed by Desmona the Great.

It was the first time I had thought of the impersonator since I read the newspaper story of Vera's drowning and I tried to find him, thinking to trade on our acquaintance to get a human interest story, but phone calls to every hotel and theater in the city were fruitless and I finally gave up trying to locate him.

Heinrich was putting on quite a show and every radio station in the country was ordered to broadcast it so that all the people could listen in.

The men and women in the streets were on fire with the martial spirit and wherever I went I encountered arrogant boasts of what "we" would do when "we" took over the world. The servants in my hotel had all taken Heinrich's proclamation of a holiday seriously and there was no one to make the beds or run the elevators. I had to pay fabulous prices to get a meal because the cooks and waiters in almost all of the restaurants had taken a holiday, too.

Some of the people I encountered were a little dissatisfied with Heinrich's decision to demonstrate the death ray before putting it into use. They thought he should just go ahead and use it, if not on the whole world, at least on the Communists.

"'We' will show them a thing or two," they boasted.

AT LAST Monday came and with it an enormous tension. Nerves were as tight as violin strings everywhere I went, and people seemed to be more concerned with what Heinrich was going to say that night than they were about the death ray demonstration the following day.

I was nervous, too, but that was because I didn't know that Monday was

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due to be my lucky day. And in more ways than one. . . .

One thing that keeps the newspaper business interesting is the fact that chance plays so large a part in it. Get a lucky break and you're candidate for the Pulitzer prize, miss a story by an eyelash and you're just as apt to be out of a job.

I've had enough of the bad ones in my time but the day before Heinrich's demonstration of the death ray, Dame Fortune walked in my room and practically sat on my lap.

Every man, woman and child in the world was jittery enough that last week but Alex Martin of the New York *Chronicle* was positively a nervous wreck. The more I thought of that summons from Heinrich to come to the Palace the jumpier I became. Finally I decided to call the *Chronicle* by transatlantic telephone to let them know how I expected to get the story out of the country, if my interview was a success, and to tell them where to find the body, if it was a failure. And I was just lucky enough to pick two o'clock in the afternoon as the time to place my phone call.

You know, of course, that if Heinrich gave me the sort of a story that his summons for a private interview half promised, it would be a literal impossibility to get it by the censors the way I'd really want to write it. So I figured out a little plan of my own and phoned the managing editor to let him know what to expect.

Ten minutes after I asked for my number New York was on the other end of the wire. Half an hour later you couldn't have bought an open line for fifty thousand dollars.

"Hello, Bill," I said into the transmitter.

His voice came back as clearly as if he were in the next room. "Hi ya, Alec. What have you got on the death ray? Everybody is half nuts here waiting for the broadcast tonight."

"I thought I'd better call you to let you know that I'm interviewing the big shot at seven o'clock," I said.

The M.E. is the kind of a guy who never forgets an expense account.

"But that's only a couple of hours before he's due to speak on the radio. Do you have to stick us for a transatlantic phone-call every time Heinrich has a press conference?"

"Press conference, my eye," I told him. "This one's exclusive. The big boy's got something he wants to let me in on all by myself. He sent for me."

"The devil he did," said Bill, excitedly. "What's it about? I didn't know you knew him that well."

"Haven't the foggiest notion," I answered. "And I don't know him at all but he sent for me just the same. Listen, Bill, this is liable to be something big so I've got to take a chance. Here's what I'm going to try to do. I've chartered a plane and hired a parachute jumper. If the story's a big one I'll go right to the plane and write it in the cabin while we head for the border. When we get there my parachute man will take the story and go over the side. If he lands okay he'll cable it in to you. I'll fly right back and be here in time to cover the death ray demonstration tomorrow. A pal of mine will take care of the meeting at the Opera House tonight if I don't cover it myself. Depends upon what Heinrich tells me at seven. How does it sound?"

"Okay with me," Bill replied. "Say, hold the phone a minute." When his voice came to me again its tone was bitingly sarcastic.

"What kind of a cock and bull story are you trying to hand me?" he said cuttingly. "I thought you were supposed to be covering Europe."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't suppose you know Heinrich's just declared war. I couldn't expect you to interrupt your social engagements long enough to find out a little thing like that."

"Wh-a-a-t!" I shouted, incredulously.

"Just got an AP flash. It's in front of me now."

"Read it to me," I yelled into the phone. "Who's he declared war on?"

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"It doesn't say. Just 'Heinrich declares war. Details follow!' "

"Keep talking into that phone," I shouted. "Say anything you like, but keep the line open till I get back. I'll give you the dope and you'll scoop the country!"

I DIDN'T wait to hear his reply but dropped the receiver and was out the door and running down the stairway. My hotel was only two blocks from AP headquarters and when I rushed into the place I found a dozen newspapermen heading for the cable office. But I knew it would take hours for the censors to pass on their stuff so I grabbed a copy of the story off the hook and ran all the way back to my hotel. By the time I reached the top of the third flights of steps I was so out of breath that I couldn't speak.

I had just strength enough to pick up the receiver and hear Bill's voice wearily droning, "Ruth, Sultan of Swat, the Behemoth of Bludgeon, changed the whole nature of the national pastime by his ability to swing on the old apple and park it out of the lot. Ty Cobb, the Georgia Peach, with his dizzy dazzling speed on the base paths and his incredible shoestring catches out in center, brought a sparkle and a thrill to the diamond pastime that the game has sorely missed since his departure."

Then I had my breath back and was talking faster than Floyd Gibbons.

"Here is is, Bill. Heinrich appeared before parliament unexpectedly at 1:45 P.M. today and asked for an immediate declaration of war against quote all resisting nations unquote. The declaration of war was passed unanimously. Then Heinrich warned all nations to take no action until the death ray demonstration tomorrow and demanded that all radio stations, everywhere, tune in by short wave to his broadcast from the National Opera House tonight and listen to quote my message to the people of all the world unquote."

"Great work, Alex," Bill said excitedly. "There's a thousand-dollar bonus waiting for you."

"If I live long enough to collect it," I said cynically.

"If you do," he agreed calmly. "All right, let's have the full details, I've got a steno on the other. . . ."

Suddenly there was a buzz in my ears and I knew the line had gone dead. They'd cut us off but the *Chronicle* had the highlights of the story and I knew the boys could take what I'd given Bill and pad it to three or four columns, so I was content.

I put on my coat and hat and went out into the street to see what I could see.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CURTAIN FALLS

AS THE afternoon wore on I began to get all shaky inside. My imagination played with a hundred reasons why the Dictator might summon me to a private interview and none of them made sense. I lit cigarettes one after another and threw them away after the second or third puff. At five o'clock I found myself in the station looking at train schedules and for one wild moment I almost bought a ticket on the Paris express. At six I tried to eat but my stomach was so paralyzed with excitement that I gave it up after the first bite and compromised on another bottle of champagne.

I haven't ever been able to remember by what route I reached the Augenleuchter Platz but I do know that when I looked at my watch, in front of the Palace, it was still twenty minutes before the hour. I walked around the block five times and caught myself counting the number of footsteps. Then I forgot whether I had reached three hundred and twenty or two hundred and thirty so I decided to go up the stairs and wait inside while I was still in my right mind.

A man in uniform was seated at a desk in the entrance hall and when he took my card he murmured, "Oh, yes," and pressed a button.

An old servant with a stubby white pompadour came presently and the man said, "Kohner, show Herr Martin to the

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private conference room on the third floor."

The old man led me to an elevator, which started with a jerk and crawled upward at a snail's pace. We came out in a wide hallway and the servant led me to a room with a heavy iron door. He leaned against it to push it open and then I was in a dark high-ceilinged room with no windows and no furniture except a long heavy table, surrounded by eight chairs, and a radio cabinet in the far corner.

The room was empty and I sat there in the semi-darkness with my stomach turning slowly over and over, and a strange feeling of weakness in my wrists.

At last there was a sound and I looked around just in time to see Heinrich, himself, enter the room and lock the door behind him.

His step was slow and his shoulders drooped wearily as he crossed to my side and sat down next to me.

"Good evening, Herr Martin," he said in that high almost-soprano voice. "I suppose you are wondering why I sent for you."

I admitted that I was.

"Look at me carefully," he said, "and tell me if you have ever seen me before."

"Of course," I answered readily. "I saw you in a box at the Linden Circus one night."

"You saw me at the Linden Circus, Herr Martin, but not in a box."

I looked at him in wonderment and as I looked his face seemed to change before my very eyes. His hand went up and swept the lock off his forehead and he smiled just the least bit and when he spoke again his voice was entirely different.

"At the Linden Circus," he repeated, "but not in a box."

I watched him in amazement.

"But you're not . . . you can't be . . ." I stammered.

"But I am," he answered, calmly.

"Desmona the Great!" I shouted incredulously.

"I congratulate you upon your memory, Herr Martin."

"You were present at the beginning," he continued, "and tonight you will hear the end."

AND then, as calmly and coldly as you would dictate a letter to your stenographer, he told me the whole amazing story, just as I have related it to you. And because his was the mind of a trained observer, he told it to me with a wealth of intimate detail, laying bare his exact emotions at each and every moment.

I listened with my mouth open and took notes with a flying pencil but if only I had had a dictaphone there, to record every word exactly as he spoke it, this narrative would be far more interesting to read, for my own literary gifts are far too feeble to transmit the story he told me.

I looked at my watch when he finished and it was ten minutes to nine.

"Tomorrow you are free to write whatever you please," he concluded, "but tonight I have yet things to do that brook no interference."

"So I must apologize for inconveniencing you," and he bowed slightly, "but it will be necessary for you to remain in this room. You will find the radio set an excellent one."

Then he was gone and I heard the sound of the key turning in the lock though it was hardly louder than the beating of my own heart.

And yet, amazing as I found his story, the most dramatic part of it was yet to come, a smashing, unbelievable climax that couldn't possibly happen. And yet it did. It happened within two hours of the time Heinrich left me in the room with the iron door, and it happened exactly as I will now describe it to you.

For while I, myself, was not an eyewitness to the incredible last act, I talked to many people who were, even including the stagehand who was so excited by the final uproar that he reached for the main switch to flood the opera house with light and took hold of the wrong handle, thus producing that weirdly symbolic ending that became so dear to the hearts of all newspaper men, the world over.

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A GLITTERING and spectacular audience gathered at the National Opera House Monday evening. Possibly never before, in the history of mankind, have so many of the leaders of any single nation assembled under one roof at the same time. For admission was by Heinrich's invitation only, and it was not so much an invitation as a command. A hundred thousand people lined the streets outside to watch the guests enter, and to listen to the loudspeakers which had been set up on the broad avenue in front of the theater, and it was only with the greatest of difficulty that the green-shirted troopers managed to clear a pathway through the throng.

Fashionable audiences are usually late, but it was different tonight, for, with all the congestion on the surrounding streets, the opera house was full long before nine o'clock.

Promptly at the stroke of nine Henline lifted his baton and the two-hundred-piece symphony orchestra broke into the strains of "Rule, Bravos."

The first bars of the stirring, martial music set off that huge audience as a match sets off powder. Four thousand people were on their feet, four thousand voices shouting the words of the marching song. The shouting continued long after the music ended, and Henline played the chorus over again and again and again.

The theater audience became a frenzied mob, drunk with the prospect of the power that was to be theirs. But even in the middle of all that frenzy, few failed to turn and look at the front box with the fierce eagle draped above it. The box, however, was empty.

"Hail Heinrich," came a voice from the throng and the crowd picked it up and began to shout the two words over and over, in unison.

"Hail Heinrich! Hail Heinrich! Hail Heinrich!"

Still no one appeared in the Dictator's box.

Henline waited until the crowd had shouted itself out before he lifted his baton once more and the trumpets sounded a bugle call as the curtain rose and a man in full dress and Inverness cape, lined with red silk, strode on the stage.

"It's Desmona the Great," a voice cried recognition, and a mighty wave of applause ran through the crowd.

Desmona lifted his hand for silence.

The lights of the theater went dim and a single brilliant spotlight bathed him in a ten-foot circle of radiance as a hush fell over the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "it is the express wish of our Leader that I commence the performance at this time. He will appear in person at the conclusion of my act but until that time our Heinrich asks that you pay close attention to the performance on the stage."

A ripple of applause ran through the Opera House and then Desmona was speaking once more.

"My first impression will be that of Neville Chamberlain, the English leader."

He crossed to the screen that concealed his makeup table and when he emerged, seconds later, he was the living image of the British Prime Minister.

Then he spoke and his words were a plea to the people of Great Britain to keep calm and await the demonstration of Heinrich's death ray. "For it is better to submit graciously and live under Heinrich's rule," he concluded, "than to oppose him and die."

The audience loved it. They applauded uproariously while Desmona returned to his makeup table; but their applause turned to angry hisses as he emerged, for, from glittering nose glasses to stooped shoulders, he was now Leon Blum, ex-premier of France.

In the character of Blum, Desmona's speech was openly craven. France was doomed, he admitted, and Heinrich, the mighty, would rule the earth.

One after another Desmona impersonated the heads of the world's great nations. He was Franklin D. Roosevelt with the magic voice, and the Emperor of Japan, the Son of Heaven. He was Stalin,

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the ruler of all the Russians, and a strangely meek and chastened Mussolini.

And the tenor of all his speeches was alike. Submit! Submit to the death ray! Submit to Heinrich! No other course was possible.

The audience cheered frantically as they saw one nation after another bow down to the inevitable. Shouts of "Hail Desmona" echoed through the opera house.

AND then the actor stepped down to the footlights and gestured for silence once more. "By Our Leader's own command," he began, "I will now present to you the crowning impersonation of my entire career. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Heinrich the First, Ruler of the World!"

Four thousand throats shouted approval as the actor stepped behind his makeup screen. And then the entire audience gasped as one man, for, from behind the screen came not an actor playing a part, but Heinrich, himself, the very living man.

He strode to the footlights and threw his arms high in salute.

"Hail, comrades," he cried.

Every man in the audience was on his feet, arms high, as a single mighty shout filled the Opera House.

"Hail Heinrich."

The radio control man clapped his earphones on his head and tuned down the roar of the crowd as Desmona, in the character of Heinrich, stepped closer to the microphone and began to talk.

"Rulers of the world, I salute you."

Another mighty, "Hail Heinrich," resounded through the auditorium.

"It is a wise nation," the speaker began, "that places its leadership in strong hands." He waited for the applause to subside. "But it is a still wiser nation," he continued, "that chooses for its leader a man as honorable as he is strong."

Applause again rang through the auditorium.

"In the world today," the actor went on, "some nations are headed by men who are wise and good. But there are other nations whose leaders are insane with the lust for power. Millions and millions of people in the world today have entrusted their leadership to, or allowed it to be seized by, men with no principle, no honor, no tolerance, and no love of justice. These national leaders are, at best, knaves and scoundrels. At worst we find them black-hearted murderers without a single redeeming virtue."

There was not a sound in the vast opera house as the man on the stage stopped to scan the room slowly.

"God help the nation that places itself in the hands of the unscrupulous," he continued, in a voice that shook with emotion.

"Woe and bitterness will be the lot of all who follow these inhuman fiends who have gained power through appealing to all that is base and vile in human nature. Behold the beasts in the field. They live in fear and insecurity at the mercy of man and the elements. When man, too, becomes a beast, then will all government end; and man, too, will be a hunted creature, seeking vainly for a place to live out his few miserable years in safety, gnawing at roots for his sustenance, springing at the throat of any of his fellows who dare approach.

"So thin is the crust of our vaunted civilization," the speaker continued, his eyes flashing, "that once the principles of justice are destroyed, once great nations place themselves under the orders of madmen and fanatics, all civilization may well come to an end, all society be destroyed, and life, itself, will become a Hell on earth, a Hell as black and damned as the Hell that finally and at last awaits the vicious leader, no matter how great his power be today."

Every face in the audience was turned toward the actor in stunned attention.

"And let the followers of such a leader prepare to share his fate," shouted the actor. "Let those who buy pride at the awful cost of all decency, all humanitarian feeling, all principle and honor, let them be prepared to pay the price of destruction, let them look forward to losing all they hold dear!"

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Suddenly, strangely, magically, his voice dropped to an ordinary conversational tone.

"I tell you this," he said calmly, "to show you the pitfalls that you have avoided by choosing your leader so understandingly."

A great sigh of relief ran through the audience.

"Consider for a moment," he continued, his voice rising, "what might have happened to you, nay, what happenings you would well deserve, if you had followed the leadership of one of these mad dogs who are ranging the face of the world today.

"Suppose Heinrich had been a murderous scoundrel, instead of the leader you see before you today."

Desmona beat himself on the breast, proudly.

"Suppose," he went on, "the death ray, with which we now plan to capture all the world, did not, in reality, exist at all, but was only a figment of the imagination, invented solely to betray you!"

Hundreds of people in the audience twisted uneasily in their seats.

"Suppose our mighty fleet of ten thousand war planes was helpless because every gasoline reservoir in the country had been drained by secret order!"

The uneasiness became general and people looked at each other in alarm, as the actor's voice rang loud and clear as the note of a bell.

"Suppose I had kept our five great munition factories each in ignorance of what the others were doing!"

"Suppose I had ordered all five to work night and day making guns, cannon and rifle!" He paused a moment for dramatic effect and his next words burst on the audience like a thunderclap.

"But what would happen to us if no one had made bullets!"

AS ONE man the audience gasped. "What would happen to us," he continued, "if I had ordered the nation's entire reserve supply of ammunition exported to foreign countries so that today we stood, at war with the whole world, yet without enough ammunition to wage war for a single week!"

General Mueller leaped to his feet, his face white as chalk. He tried to speak but before a word could pass his lips hands clutched his heart and he collapsed in his seat.

In the silence he slumped there, without moving again.

The man on the stage broke into sudden, strident laughter, laughter so unexpected that the entire audience was startled.

"But how silly it is to alarm yourself with such impossible conjectures," he said, smiling. "For at your head stands not such a man as I have described but Heinrich!"

Once more he patted himself on the chest.

"And to show you how foolish such alarms can be I am going to call upon five men in this audience, the men who head our five mighty munitions plants."

"I see Herr Hartman sitting in the third row. Herr Hartman speak up, what do you manufacture?"

A plump gentleman struggled to his feet. His face was smiling.

"A capital act, Desmona," he called across the footlights, "but these matters are a state affair and not to be discussed in public."

His cool voice seemed to relieve the tension, but Desmona was frowning.

"Come, come," said the actor, impatiently. "Did I not tell you that this performance is given at the special command of our Heinrich? You do not think, for a moment, that I would dare ask you to answer such a question if our Heinrich had not commanded it. Why it would mean my death!

"Answer, Herr Hartman, it is our Leader's wish!"

Hartman looked around him in confusion. Then he stammered:

"Why we make guns in our plant, cannons and rifles."

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Desmona gestured to a man at the other end of the row.

"And you, Herr Mannheim?"

Mannheim was not smiling. His voice was low and serious as he answered, "Machine guns only."

"No bullets?" asked the man on the stage, solicitously.

"No bullets!"

"But come, Herr Dierdorf," continued Desmona, turning to a party in a lower box, "surely you must make bullets."

Dierdorf rose to his feet and looked frantically around him. "In our plant we make nothing but artillery," he stammered.

The opera house was electric with tension. All eyes followed the direction of Desmona's glance as he turned to the fourth munitions maker.

"And what do you make, Schmidt?" his voice rapped out like a rifle shot.

Schmidt stared wildly at the stage.

"Guns! Guns! Only *guns!*" he screamed.

A mad shout rose from the audience.

"Albert! Albert! Where is Albert!"

In the midst of the clamor Desmona took a step forward on the stage. Without attempting to quiet the audience he thrust out his arm, pointing.

A little man rose from his chair in the very first row and the auditorium froze into a silence so absolute that not a soul seemed to breathe as they waited for his words. His mouth opened but no sound came from his lips. Finally he took a deep breath and a stricken pallor spread across his face as he mumbled.

"Guns! Guns! Gott in Himmel, nothing but guns."

BEDLAM broke loose in the opera house. The radio operator looked stupidly at his control instruments and suddenly remembered that they were on and the whole world was listening.

Then voices began to shout: "Heinrich! Heinrich! Where is he!"

Desmona stepped toward the footlights and raised his hand, commanding silence. Every eye turned upon him as a hushed silence fell upon the auditorium once more.

"You may well ask where Heinrich is," he cried, in a strong, vibrant voice. "And you may well wonder what the world, whose peace you have threatened for so long, will do to you now that you are helpless!"

He paused for an instant, and in that silence his words seemed to be still resounding in the vast auditorium. Then when he spoke again his voice had new power.

"There is no death ray! There is no gasoline! There are no bullets! As for Heinrich, the Brutal, you will find him where he has been for many long months. In a canvas shroud at the bottom of the river Prese!"

Not one member of the audience moved or spoke as the man on the stage turned to the microphone for the last time.

"And while Heinrich has rotted in Hell, who has taken his place?" the actor shouted into the microphone. "I will tell you now! His place was taken by the man you see standing before you, making his last, his farewell, his absolutely final appearance on this or any stage. Ladies and gentlemen, I present that king of all impersonators, that mighty instrument of revenge. The hand of Justice—Desmona—often called the Great!"

A mad cry rose from the audience. Suddenly it was an angry mob, rushing at the actor in wild fury.

But too late!

A single shot sounded in China, Africa, Australia, Sibera—wherever there was a radio set. It sounded on your radio set, too, and then occurred that strangely symbolic accident that brought the story of a great actor to its only fitting and appropriate close.

The clumsy stagehand reached for a switch to flood the opera house with light and grasped the wrong handle in his excitement.

There was a sound of revolving winches and the curtain fell. . . .

THE END

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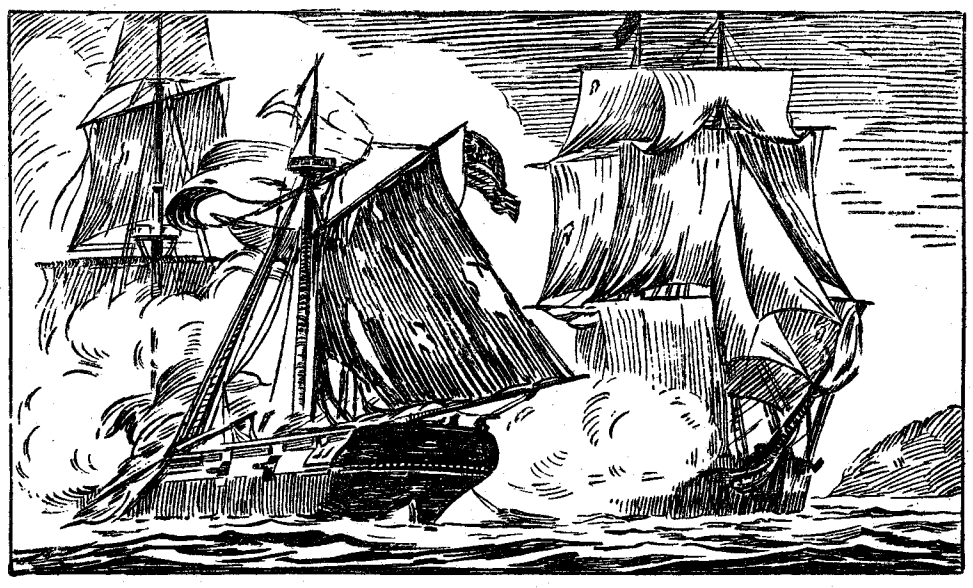

Knight's Gambit

By KENNETH B. ATKINSON

Author of "I'll Bring You a General"

Accepted, sir; twenty paces, and let frigates be the weapons. A Yankee will convince you that Britannia does not rule the waves

THROUGH the foggy night a cry had come across the water. At the rail of the prize, lately the *Satyr* of George III's Navy, the American, Lieutenant Richard Blades, exchanged a glance with his sailing master, Hogan.

"I don't like it," he said, voice expressionless.

The hail came again, startlingly clear through the drifting mists. "What sloop is that?" Then there was the creaking noise of gun-ports.

The truth, it occurred to Blades, was the best stratagem. If the challenger were the *Constitution* which they'd lost in the fog, the captain would understand. If British, there was yet a chance of not being boarded. Meanwhile the breeze was freshening and the night was black, though the mists were thinning fast. He lifted his voice.

"This is His Britannic Majesty's Sloop *Satyr*, Captain Stork."

Scarcely drawing breath the lieutenant and the sailing master stood like figure-heads. Blades could sense his men, uneasy at their stations. Perhaps the frigate wouldn't board. She was fading to stern. Perhaps . . .

The reply came bawled through a trumpet.

"His Majesty's Frigate *Avenger*, Captain Hilton. Hold fast. We're sending a boat."

Another time, with half his guns Richard Blades would have fought. Aldeus Hilton was a name that smelled from the Chesapeake to Halifax. Before 1812 he'd pressed Americans by scores into service of the king, had searched Yankee vessels at his own whim. But the *Satyr*, pounded by the *Constitution* yesterday off Guadeloupe, was in no shape to fight. Sent aboard with a

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prize-crew, Blades had found a company of British soldiers, also a Miss Damaris Considine sailing with her maid to join her father, a general at Quebec. These two he'd left at liberty, all others forced below. Then, separated from the *Constitution* in the fog, he'd had to point twelve-pounder down the main hatch to keep the prisoners at bay.

"Crack on all sail," Blades ordered Hogan.

They should run for it in the mist and night. Already the *Avenger's* dim outline had disappeared, though he heard activity and the squeak of davits lowering a boat. Critically he eyed the battered mizzenmast and saw something he'd forgotten. By the rail, not five yards away, was the girl, Damaris Considine, her face shielded from the damp chill within a fur-lined hood. Her very presence there warned him, but even as he moved she shouted to the vanished frigate.

"Help! There's a Yankee prize-crew aboard."

The audacity of it was stunning, but instantly he reacted. Three quick strides and he was crushing a hand against her mouth. From the *Avenger* came an angry warning.

"Heave to or we'll blow you out of the water."

There sounded the shrillness of a fife and a drum beating to quarters. But even then Richard Blades was conscious of the girl's body, of her muffled breathing. Instinctively he held her to him as the gloom flamed into thunder and a broadside crashed through the rigging hurling broken spars and splinters to the deck.

"Your friends have nice manners," he observed, his mind working smoothly. For years he'd fought in actions against French and British war ships. The maneuvers were as formal as in chess. Too, he knew his player of this more deadly game, especially British players. Captain Hilton would come about and fire his starboard guns.

In a low voice Blades called to Hogan. "Swing to larboard and we'll cross his wake. Silence on deck!" Crossing thus behind her he hoped to find the stolid Briton returning to fire in the wrong direction.

Hogan himself swung the prow to larboard. Shuddering, the sloop came about, sails backing to the masts like loosened drums. lumbered across the frigate's wake and fully reversed her course. Blades, holding Damaris with a firm arm, waited alert but confident, the air brittle with the tight-suppressed excitement of the prize crew.

His eyes narrowed.

"About now," he said, "Your friends should try another broadside."

A long minute—fog drifting in the night, low clouds veiling moon and stars. Then yellow flame flashed far to larboard, followed by a shock of air against their faces, a rapid thudding rumble, but no scream of cannon balls.

"And that's that," said Blades, releasing the girl. "Now squawk!"

"Sir, even for a Yankee you're especially offensive."

"That's because your nose is tainted from those Redcoats below." But turning away to set the course for Boston, he wondered with more than curiosity if she'd ever been kissed.

He was still remembering the feel of her body when the lookout, at dawn, shouted "Sail-ho!" Through his glass Blades made out a high mass of canvas, deep pink in the early sun. It was the *Constitution.* She came up quickly to resume convoy.

RICHARD BLADES found Damaris next morning studying a shattered carronade. He decided he should keep an eye on her.

She nodded coldly at his "Goodday." It was not a good day, she stated. "Not when Yankee outlaws are loose on the seas."

Blades lifted an amused eyebrow, though something tingled in his veins. He never argued with a woman, nor permitted argument from men. Miss Considine, however, went on without encouragement,

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eyes bright and chestnut hair flying in the wind. It humiliated her—association with such pirates. As for him personally, His Majesty's press gang should have given him a term in the Royal Navy. There—at the end of a cat-o'-nine-tails—he might have learned decency.

"Well, well," said Blades as though she grew tedious. Approaching was her cousin, Captain Harold Stock, Duke of Dennisfield, paroled now that the *Constitution* had returned. A man of thirty, he was young for a King's Navy. Face and figure, the fine edge of white cuff, the fine white pantaloons, were a gentleman's, though his florid face hinted at a taste for scented bedrooms—and for flogging sailors. Now shaved and washed he was quite restored to his accustomed dignity. Blades bowed politely. "Does Your Grace by any chance play chess?"

The duke's large china-blue eyes gleamed. If he fancied himself as a captain of a man-o-war, he fancied himself more as a chess player. Try him!

They moved inside the *Satyr's* cabin where a portrait of his majesty looked vacantly on two games won by Blades, another drawn. By noon Captain Stork was even more florid, his temper flaming; Miss Damaris reduced to boredom. "You were lucky," she told Blades with an insolent smile.

Thereafter the two officers played daily. The prize-crew had been increased and there was less trouble with the prisoners. Mornings Blades walked the deck, often with Damaris. An armed neutrality had been reached and she made fewer comments about Yankees. Once, he told her of a voyage he had made to the Indies at fifteen as a midshipman. Her eyes glowed. She was standing close to catch his voice above the wind and she put a hand on his arm to hold herself with the ship's motion.

That day Richard Blades felt remarkable. And he was routed at chess, his mind wandering, eyes as vacant as his majesty's on the wall.

She had the damnedest, the most tantalizing mouth.

But when his thoughts returned to strategy he won at will, and with great pleasure, somehow because of Damaris. The duke seemed to like her rather better than a cousin. "The first principle of warfare," Blades observed one afternoon to Stork who'd been uselessly maneuvering a rook, "the very first is the objective." He bought up a knight to threaten both the captain's king and queen. "Check!"

In a corner, helpless, Stock stared at the board in stunned surprise. Then with a violent gesture he swept the pieces off the table. "I wish I had a ship," he blazed.

"Is this a challenge, Captain?"

"Yes, a challenge, to meet me in ship-to-ship combat whenever I get free."

Blades turned to Damaris whose attention, flagging through the chess game, had sharpened at this personal encounter. "Bear witness, Miss Considine, I accept. But I warn you, captain, I won't let you go for sake of meeting you in action, much as I should like to."

ON A moonless night fifty miles off Boston, Blades, called aboard the *Constitution,* was told to slip alone into harbor past the British blockaders. The consort would not risk being bottled up. Back aboard the sloop he ordered all lights out and sent a special lookout up the mast. Then he remembered Damaris and the duke. Another treacherous outcry . . .

He found the girl on the quarter-deck, a slim silhouette above the taffrail. She was staring down at the cockboat showing faintly in the luminescent wake. To prevent Stock escaping in it Blades had stored the oars and sail aboard the sloop. At his step Damaris turned and came to meet him.

"You must go to your cabin," he began at once.

"Why so?"

Her attitude annoyed him. "Because this is no place for you." He took her arm.

She shook away. "I prefer to stay here."

It was not, he recognized, a time for words. With one arm he gripped her body, with the other pressed her mouth

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against his shoulder and carried her thus to her cabin. He could feel her teeth trying to bite him. It only made him smile. She thrashed her legs and he held her tighter. His pulses pounded like a drum, her cheek brushing his, soft and warmly smooth.

Kicking open her cabin door Blades started to set her down—and realized she was quiet in his arms. In the dusk her face was an oval blur and his heart pounded wilder. He heard her breathing, low and irregular. Then abruptly he heard something else.

Overhead, bare feet pattered across the deck, followed by a general commotion. It was time to go. But at once he was lifting up her face and kissing her. With incredible joy he felt her arms tighten around his neck. Her lips returned his kiss.

For one blinding moment Richard Blades held her, then the sound of his name called somewhere brought him back. "Dearest!" he whispered hoarsely. He set her down, turned and hurried up on deck.

While he'd been below, the *Satyr,* rippling through a calm sea, her sails set to beat against a north wind, had come within gunshot of an English blockader. Climbing up the rigging, Blades peered intently at the faint outlines in the gloom. If the *Satyr* were discovered—he bit against his lip.

A long time he watched that blot as it faded slowly on the horizon. Listening to the swish of water past the sloop's side his mind rushed on, returning to the girl. He loved her—no evading it. And no good could come of it. She and her cousin— His thought brought up with a shock. Stork!

Led astern by instinct his suspicion was confirmed. The cockboat's towline was hacked through. Holding the wet end, he gazed into the night. Without oars, food or water, Stork was waiting back there for the British to pick him up. Softly Blades swore, then shrugged. Well, Stork had got away.

But in the latter's cabin was a letter. Polite, in its British way it was direct. To replace the *Satyr,* Stork wrote, His Majesty's Government would undoubtedly supply a new command. He would then name a meeting place for their duel. Blades twisted his mouth. Devilish humorous! Not a second did the man expect blame for losing his ship. The *Constitution* was a forty-four gun frigate; the *Satyr* a twenty-gun sloop of war. Stork's unconcern was plain.

Even as he smiled Blades grew serious. He was due for promotion, for his own command. It had better come soon.

EARLY next morning, in sight of Boston Harbor and all danger from blockaders past, Damaris poined him on the quarter-deck. Her hair was flying in the wind and the light sparkling in her eyes made him catch his breath. The air had colored her cheeks and her mouth was red, tempting his kiss. But Hogan watching at the rail made him ill at ease. She tucked her hand beneath his arm and matched her step to his. "I guess they picked him up." Her voice was matter-of-fact.

He looked down at her quickly. Face serene, she was studying the Boston shoreline.

"Why did you help him?"

"Why shouldn't I? I'm very fond of him."

Unaccountably he felt disturbed, cheated. "Then you didn't mean last night."

She turned to him swiftly and they both stopped. Her look was quiet and clear. "I did, Richard. I meant everything."

He drew a breath and felt how hard his heart was pounding.

"But it's going to change things," she went on, eyes intent on his. "You can't fight your duel."

Silently Richard Blades turned his gaze to sea, aware of the rushing water thrown from the bows, of the indefinable hum of the rigging. It brought back all the years on men-o'-war when he'd let himself dream. A feeling of futility weighed upon him.

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"If he sends the challenge I must meet him."

"But he's my cousin. You can't drag this war into my family."

He didn't answer and she must have seen what was in his mind—the demands of honor and tradition. For she added, "If you do," and choked, "if you do—"

The sunlight showed the pain in her upturned face. He knew then whatever happened, for him there was no one else. And he hesitated, trying to catch forever her hair in the wind, chestnut and shining, the look in her eyes, and her mouth half parted, not provoking now—questioning.

"No matter what it means to us both, I've got to fight him."

•

OFFICIAL Washington that spring temporized and delayed. And so eager for privateering were New England seamen that Blades gloomily decided that if he ever got a ship he'd never find men to sail it.

His parting with Damaris had left him in a bleak world. It was all over, she had told him, cold against his resolve. His easy good humor left him and Hogan called him sour to his face. He merely shrugged.

May brought word from Captain Stork through devious diplomatic channels. The captain's luck was riding high. A captured Yankee frigate had been brought into Basse Terre, St. Kitts. Stork, borne there by the British ship which found him drifting in the cockboat, had been given the command. He said nothing of the court-martial which must have whitewashed the *Satyr's* loss. For their duel the duke named the roads off Basse Terre; the date the end of June.

Blades fumed.

It was mid-May finally when he was commissioned captain, assigned a thirty-gun frigate. As he had requested, his orders called for raiding commerce in the Caribbean. His eyes gleamed at first sight of his frigate. Tall masts, firm lines. In gold on her prow, *Invincible*. But a tour of her decks proved her otherwise. Twenty-two long twelve-pounders, fourteen thirty-two pound carronades, no more.

"Invincible!" jeered Hogan, a blunt thumb pointing at the rows of lightweight cannon. "In a fish run!"

At the latter's scorn Blades squared his new epaulets, eyeing Hogan coldly. An able sailing master—granted; but led astray too often by flimsy Irish prejudice.

"We'll fight him none the less," he stated grimly.

THEY reached St. Kitts June 27, 1814. Blades had competent officers, but his pessimism as to seamen had been right. Hogan, however, busy in the taverns with rum and promises, had recruited two hundred, plus some Portuguese, and Blades had sailed at once. Quickly free of the blockaders—the *Invincible* was fast and handled smoothly—he'd enforced daily gun drill, firing at hogsheads dropped overboard.

Arriving in a red sunset ahead of a storm, they'd anchored thankfully in a pear-shaped lagoon on the island's east shore, where throughout the night they rode out the weather. Awakened at dawn by a frenzied pounding on his door, Blades snatched up a glass and rushed out to find a dark-visaged Portuguese babbling incoherently. The man's frightened eyes told the story and a moment later he was gazing over the lagoon's narrow entrance at a black frigate ploughing toward them under huge sails.

Through his glass Blades could see the Royal Cross of St. George flying from the main-truck. She was easily forty-four guns and Stork had mentioned twenty-four-pounders. Above the throbbing of his blood Blades could hear the murmur of his excited crew. Hogan ran up. "Is it Stork?" he panted.

"Of course." Blades looked at the sailing master with a calm learned from hectic years at sea. "Yonder ship was built at Philadelphia. Look at her lines.

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And she's flying the British ensign. That's Stork and his captured frigate."

Shamed, Hogan covered his alarm with customary sarcasm.

"Well, about now Duke Harold is likely saying, *Check!*"

"Quiet, fool! Go pipe the men to their stations."

The sailing master hurried off and Blades ordered to prepare for action. Spurred by beating drums, the crew cleared the tackles, loaded and ran out the guns, hauled water aboard and set sand in readiness for bloody decks. Other hands loosed sail after sail amid screeching blocks and groaning yards. The anchor came up and the *Invincible* began to move toward the challenger.

Like a great bird on the water, she moved. . . .

Blades, on the quarter-deck, stood intent and poised, shouting out commands and alert for Stork's first maneuver. The black frigate still was coming head on. A naked eye could see the gleaming spray kicked up by her prow. No affair this of sparring for position in the open sea. Building on his luck in finding Blades trapped, Stork obviously meant to corner him in the lagoon, counting on his heavy guns.

The frigate, Blades saw, was smartly handled, likely by a seasoned crew.

"There it goes," shouted Hogan as a cotton ball burst above the Briton's beakhead. A boom reached them and the shot plumed spray fifty yards short. Stork would now follow up by turning right or left and judging on that first shot, cannonade him at long range.

Blades' lips tightened.

A ship of .24s or even .18s could have lain broadside to, firing at her adversary's prow. For Blades the defense was a swift lunge across the frigate's course, a raking salvo the length of her. To swing away meant passing parallel, exchanging screaming iron courtesies. A glance at the lagoon showed the greater room to south, and thus Blades headed, judging Stork would seek the same open water. Too late he caught the greenish glint of sunken coral reefs, and cursing for Hogan to come about, he looked back to see Stork turning north, his larboard gun muzzles swinging into view.

There was an uneasy mutter, a stirring of feet on the decks. The *Invincible* could ill trade body blows at any but carronade range. Blades bawled out to the gun-deck: a broadside the instant Stork came in line of fire. His lips were tight and resolute. If they could work the ship, still avoid the reefs, after Stork's cannonade, there was yet a move or two. He braced himself as red flame leaped from the frigate.

Blades' mind was a whirl of colors and sounds and confusion. He steadied himself, and suddenly was icily calm.

This was the moment—now. . . .

Almost in the same instant the *Invincible* shook to her own broadside. The roar was echoed with a crash of spars and rending timbers as the British round shot tore through the rigging. Doubly shocked, the *Invincible* rolled drunkenly. Blades, flung forward, clutched a ratline. He saw the damage aloft. Spars and canvas hung at crazy angles. Another, lower, salvo would sink him.

His own twelve-pounders had merely pattered on the frigate's sides.

NEEDING now to spar for the next opening, Blades rallied his men, shouted to Hogan to wear full about, and after a moment's disorder they headed slowly west under tattered mainsails, away from Stork and toward the center of the island. Keenly Blades watched for the response. The black frigate following her broadside had luffed to the north, a cloud of yellow smoke marking where she'd been. Apparently convinced, however, that the Yankee was making water, trying for the beach, Stork hoisted his top-gallants to come lunging in pursuit.

She was fast, too. No doubt in the world about that.

Black and glistening the British frigate shimmered in the tropic glare, her white

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sails spotless. The scene burned into Blades' mind. The blue lagoon below the palm-topped cliffs, the frigate's ports mouthing heavy long guns—above all the tense postures of his own crew, silent at their stations. The sight whipped up his confidence.

Closing in triumphantly, Stork's intent to board was obvious. The Yankee gunners stood with matches flaring. The carronades were now well in range, but still Blades waited, a blue coldness in his eyes, and still the British frigate loomed closer, decks swarming boarders. He could read her name, *Perseus,* and he had time to smile. Was the *Invincible* the Golden Fleece? The ships were only yards apart. In the shrouds men began to see each other's faces, looking down their musket barrels.

A sullen crackling fire commenced.

Abruptly Blades turned to Hogan. "Execute the next command contrariwise," he whispered fiercely. "Whichever way I call to turn, swing the helm the other way."

The eyes of the astonished sailing master widened, but, no fool, he nodded and hurried down to take the wheel himself. Blades, measuring the *Perseus* and the closing distance, forced himself to count ten.

Then his voice lifted loud to carry to the other ship.

"Hard a-larboard your helm."

"A-larboard the helm," sang out Hogan repeating the command, and threw the rudder to starboard.

Stork was deceived. Intent on boarding, he feared his quarry slipping out of reach and hastened to turn with her.

"Hard a-larboard!" echoed his command aboard the *Perseus.*

Every second counted now—every least fraction of an inch—every possible twist of the enemy's thought.

And then it happened.

Leading the black frigate half a length, the *Invincible's* bowsprit surged abruptly toward her, not away as Stork was expecting. Too late to avoid her, the *Perseus* plunged ahead, trapped into collision. Crashing through the Yankee's spars her jib boom speared her adversary's rigging, the hulls smashed together.

Tightly snared, the *Perseus,* guns pointing to the side, was at awful handicap. And above the tumult as the British fought to wrench free sounded Blades' cry:

"Check! Captain Stork."

His voice was light and laughing and triumphant.

At merciless short range he smashed at the *Perseus* with devastating broadsides. The storm of iron swept her with a fiery hurricane from bow to stern. In reply Stork was limited to musket fire. But still he had men and under cover of the blinding smoke he set about to use them.

Where the *Perseus'* bow hung over the *Invincible,* massing shapes of boarders took form above the rail. Blades saw them from a gun carriage and rushed to the danger point.

Sweat was rolling down between his shoulderblades, and bathing his chest. He brushed a hand across his brow.

"Drive them!" he shouted hoarsely, lashing out with curses.

With him went a springing swarm of men. The musket fire redoubled in the shrouds, vicious and effective. Blades swerved aside as a body hurtled to the deck in front of him. There was a red splatter. From the bowsprit of the *Perseus* poured a yelling avalanche of flesh and steel. It was met by swinging cutlass, musket, here and there an ax. Richard Blades had lost his coldness. He slashed at heads and naked shoulders. He clearly felt his heavy weapon strike. He clove a man from eyes to chin.

Men were yelling, some savagely and some with death freezing their throats.

Steel clanged on steel endlessly. . . .

Hogan, his face a mass of smoke, was struggling to board the *Perseus.* Out of nowhere loomed a red-coated marine, pistol aimed at Hogan's breast. Blades cursed and hurled his cutlass, saw it knock the pistol spinning.

Then blinding pain leaped through him,

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and an instant later he lost consciousness. . . .

FOR two days he lay in his cabin. They fed him grog and broth and when he started asking questions Hogan answered, "Checkmate," with an Irish gleam in his eye that was enough for Richard Blades.

The wound, a musket ball along his skull, had dropped him in the hand-to-hand fighting. It hadn't been his luck to see the British boarders driven back or the hauling down of Stork's colors, precisely twenty-six minutes from the first broadside. But Hogan was saving for his captain a greater, more private satisfaction. When Blades could sit up the sailing master brought Duke Harold to him in his cabin, where a lamp swinging in its gimbals shone on Spartan-bare surroundings.

Stork looked pale. Entering, he paused accustoming his eyes to the lamplight, then saluted and stood rigid at attention.

"The fortunes of war, Captain Stork. Your sword, if you please."

Tight-lipped, jerkily, Duke Harold drew and held out a jewel-studded hilt. The light gleamed briefly on the naked steel and the painful ceremony was complete.

"I hope there'll be another time," said Stork. "I'll watch for trickery."

His face was expressionless.

"I hope the same," Blades replied equably. "I'll have a care not to be trapped."

They left it at that. Blades held no grudges, but he often walked the deck lonely and remembering.

He'd put a prize-crew on the *Perseus* and twenty days later was in Boston amid acclaim and festivity.

But at once he tore himself away and sought a plain wooden house on the outskirts of the city where Damaris was paroled. The government had deemed her dangerous, refusing safe conduct to Canada. Richard Blades knew that seeing her would be torture, but fiercely resentful of her hold upon him went to meet her in a final defiance.

She was summoned after endless explanations.

"Who won?" she asked when the first awkwardness was over. She was standing with a hand on a satinwood sofa, afternoon sunlight streaming through a window on her chestnut hair as Blades, with an ache in his heart, remembered shining sun one other day.

He tried to answer but all at once couldn't look at her, had to stare numbly at the gold braid on his sleeve. He clenched his fists.

It was weak and damnable, the sudden stinging in his eyes.

But Damaris gave her own answer.

"You did," she said softly. "I heard the shouting in the street this morning."

"He's quite unharmed," said Richard, striving for some of Hogan's sarcasm, "save perhaps in his vanity."

It was time to go, to say goodbye, then turn on the right heel, as he'd been taught aboard ships. If the cursed mistiness would only leave him.

Damaris said, "I knew you would." And the softness in her voice forced up his head. Her eyes were not hard or angry. . . .

"But still," she went on, "I was afraid."

"Afraid?" he whispered, struggling for control. "But you said that if I fought him, we—"

She swayed toward him. "I'd never speak to you again if you hadn't."

One moment she was looking at him, all he'd ever asked for in her eyes. The next he had his arms about her, her dress feeling wonderful and strange to his toughened hands. A long time he kissed her and then she drew back laughing as though he'd interrupted. "You accepted Harold's challenge."

Over her shoulder Richard Blades stared at his image in a mirror. The image stared blankly, bewilderedly back.

Anyhow, he repeated to himself, he understood ships and guns.

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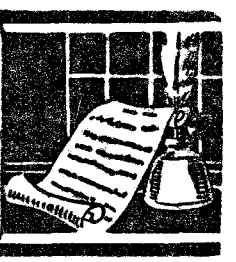
Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



INCREDIBLY enough, our authors seem to have developed a passion for cold and accurate facts. There is no one more surprised than we are by this phenomenon because we had always thought of these authors as men of flaring and impatient genius who wrote their stories in a kind of creative fever and couldn't be bothered with small things. Instead, they appear to be pale library-haunters, pryers into the past and the forgotten, men weighted with a mass of curious data which occasionally they are impelled to pass on.

Last week Carl Rathjen made an impressive appearance in Argonotes with an array of facts anent rain in California that certainly ought to give pause to the embattled Californians. Mr. Rathjen justified every raindrop and every rowboat in his story, "It Rained One Night." And now here are Messrs. Carse and Foster-Harris digging into the history of bull-fighting and the West, respectively. Of course, we are heartily in favor of all this enthusiastic accuracy; it keeps the reader-experts from barking at us all the time. We're pleased as all get-out—but we're surprised. . . .

You may recall that we have been insisting for some little time that a story called "Picador" would eventually appear in ARGOSY. Well, it has, you see; it is with us this week, splendid in its completeness. And we consider it only just that, after all this delay, Mr. Carse should have space in this department to discuss horses and bulls.

ROBERT CARSE

This is simply a bit of the record to back up the bull-fighting capabilities of Joe Hood and his *Hombrecito.*

In the old days of medieval Spain, bull-fighting was a sport of the nobility. Mounted on his best horse, your Spanish knight killed his bull with the lance. Spain's greatest hero in the wars with the Moors, the Cid (real name Don Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar) killed many bulls in the arena, mounted and with the lance. Charles the Fifth, King of Spain, killed a bull in a like manner on the birthday of his son, later Philip the Second. It wasn't until the start of the eighteenth century that the art became professionalized. A famous Andalusian fighter, Francisco Romero of Ronda, was the first outstanding professional, and it was he who substituted the sword for the lance as the killing weapon and introduced the *muleta*—cape. During and since his time, of course, the matador has killed from on foot.

But the ability of the horse to dominate a killing bull is still currently recognized. There's a record of one ring horse backing up thirty-seven supposedly tough bulls, finally to be retired in some permanent glory. In Mexico the sporting gentry in their *charro* games fight the bull solely from horseback. President Calles, who loves the sport, held a number of such exhibitions for ex-Ambassador Morrow, man and horse giving the bull a good whipping. And, much as described in "Picador," the *picadores* working the bulls at the spring *tientas* at the bull ranches use the same horse all day long, and the same horse a good many more times than once.

Due to the Spanish lust for blood, for a long time old, busted-wind hackhorses were regularly sacrificed to the bulls by the *picadores* in the ring. In 1926, though, Primo de Rivera, then the Spanish dictator, insisted all ring horses wear a leather armor. His theory was that the horse should have something of a chance. If the matadors wanted the bull tired before they made the kill, they could do the main part of the work themselves, and in any case save the worn-out wrecks of horses from being splattered all over the arena. The matadors, Dictator de Rivera argued, had to fight better, or find better horses that would use strength and skill instead of ribs and entrails against the bull. It's too bad he couldn't have seen *Hombrecito.*

New York City

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WE ARE grateful to Mr. Carse for additional information on death in the afternoon. . . . At this point you have undoubtedly read "The Long Knives Ride" (if you haven't, go back now), and the following letter will prove instructive.

FOSTER-HARRIS

The period of "The Long Knives Ride" is about 1871, when General Mackenzie and the Fourth Cavalry were trying to drive Quanah Parker, Mow-wi, Para-a-coom and other subchiefs of the Quahada Comanches back to their reservations at Fort Sill. The scene is the Quitaque country. The arms and fighting tactics are taken scrupulously as they actually were.

And, by the way, in that Staked Plains background, there may be an item of interest for Argonotes. I used to live out there in the Texas Panhandle, and the explanation of how the Staked Plains got their name never did sound very satisfactory to me.

In Spanish, it's "Llano Estacado," which can also be translated "Palisaded Plain," or "Walled Plain." That translation seems very natural, when you think of the abrupt way the caprock breaks down in a regular wall, all along the eastern edge. But the popular explanation is that the old Spaniards actually staked out a trail across those plains, with stakes.

Well, mebbeso, mebbeso. But will somebody tell me how many wagon loads of stakes those old hombres would have needed to stake a followable trail maybe three hundred miles or so? How come they so thoughtfully were toting so many stakes along?

Norman, Oklahoma

FINISHED, for the moment, with our authors, we move on to a discussion that concerns us even more nearly than matadors and the Plains. Is ARGOSY today only a feeble remnant of a glorious past, or can it stand up on its own feet and speak for itself? Well, here is

LA WAYNE VALLEN

who says—very pleasantly—that he liked things better in the old days.

In recent years I have gradually drifted away

LOOKING AHEAD!

MAD MONEY

It was the sort of idea that only a dizzy Miss Millions would get—helping that girl escape from the state asylum. And when the girl was accused of bringing about her uncle's murder, Miss Millions faced charges of being an accessory before the fact. So it was up to Jim Daniels, her brainy young attorney, to get her out of it. Introducing the cleverest lawyer in fiction since Gillian Hazeltine and Perry Mason, in an exciting new novel by

NORBERT DAVIS

THE LIVES OF HANDSLED BURKE

Swen said, "Yah," when Burke told him, for the two men had been hibernating too long in town. Once more they would hit the Siwash trail. And Handsled Burke knew he would have to outwit the most powerful corporation in the North to stake his claim—but he could not guess that his own past would rise suddenly before him, more terrifying than the wolves' cry. A colorful novelet by

C. F. KEARNS

SNAKES IN THE GRASS

Mase McKay, that devilin' cracker from the 'Glades, comes up to town to see about a little excitement—with a sackful of rattlers as his only luggage. . . . Naturally, it's Mase who provides most of the excitement. An unusual short story by

CHARLES T. JACKSON

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JUNE 25

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from a weekly reading of the ARGOSY mainly because I believe it no longer compares with the magazine of ten or fifteen years ago. However, I still buy an occasional copy in hopes that there may be something of interest to an old reader. I was very much interested in the suggestions for a quarterly devoted to reprints. Why not revive the interest of old readers by having them vote on which stories they would like for each number. I'm sure many of the new readers would be interested in reading some of the old stories they have heard so much about.

Would any of these stories arouse memories in the minds of veteran ARGOSY passengers? "The Ship of Ishtar," A. Merritt, 1924; "The Blind Spot," A. Hall and Homer Flint, 1921; "He Rules Who Can," Arthur Brodeur, 1928; "The Moon Pool" and "The Metal Monster," A. Merritt, 1919; "Riddle Gawne," Seltzer, 1914; "The Crime Circus," Worts, 1927; and stories like "The Copper Princess," "Seven Footprints to Satan," "The Golden Burden," "The Phantom in the Rainbow," "McPfee's Sensational Rest," "The Man Who Mastered Time," "Clovelly," "The Mark of Zorro," "Brass Commandments," and a thousand others.

It brings back memories, doesn't it? I can still see John Kenton living a lifetime in a few short hours on Ishtar's tossing vessel, beside Gigi, Sigurd, and the Persian in that timeless world, fighting, dying—

Beloit, Wisconsin

IT WOULD be neither respectful to our predecessors nor in becoming modesty for us to get into an argument with Mr. Vallen. We don't want to, anyhow. But if letters come in, insisting that everything is all right, we've got to print them, haven't we?

P. N. NICHOLAIOFF

Some years ago the author of "The Red Germ of Courage" sent me a complimentary copy of ARGOSY in which his story appeared, and ever since then have been reading your magazine. If it hadn't been for that I would have started at a later date; however, I wish to thank the author—Stoke, I think it was—for the introduction.

In the years that followed, I read ARGOSY with a great deal of pleasure—dropping intermittently when, for some reason, the stories lost or lacked the fascination to hold me ardently, only to pick up a copy at a later date and start reading it with renewed enthusiasm.

So much for that. I notice that some readers lament the good old days. Frankly, I do not. For my part, I consider ARGOSY better than it had been. True, I miss those favorite authors of those days, but your younger ones have what it takes. Those authors of past ARGOSY days have gone on for new fields to conquer. I see them now in *Satevepost, Colliers, Liberty* and other slick biggies. Once in a while they recall those days and in memory send a yarn to ARGOSY. But their writing is not the same.

Brand, Pierce, Burroughs, etc. still adorn the contents page—Roscoe too. "On Evil Beach" was swell. Roscoe still has his style. "The Living Ghost" starts with a bang.

Chicago, Illinois

THE next correspondent has discovered that the fiction in ARGOSY is very often a prophesy of fact—a point which sometimes startles us as much as it does the readers, though we don't admit it. We prefer to have you believe that, like our authors, we are blessed with second sight.

ROBERT L. BACON

The exceptional standard of ARGOSY fiction is shown by comparison with current slick fiction, but especially by such incidents as the printing last few days of advices from England telling of organized sabotage of new air armament works. ARGOSY had the beat in fiction form some months before in "London Skies."

L. A. H.'s letter in current ARGOSY prompts this spasm. I rate "Golden Knight" as the best written novel I have read in years. Every detail was perfect—every bit of dialogue superb.

"War For Sale" was a distant second but equally distant ahead of "Stunt Man," the third award. "Stunt Man" lacked the skill and polish but made up for it in the fascination of the locale and bizarre characters.

New York City

TO CLOSE, we relay a garland to James Lockette Hill—a garland that ought particularly to please him because it comes from a man who knows what he—and Mr. Hill—are talking about.

ALBERT H. SHERMAN

Having read several stories in the February 12th issue of ARGOSY; I would like to commend the stories "Salvage Tide" by Richard H. Watkins; "Monument at Stovepipe," by Robert E. Pinkerton; but the story that I especially like was a story by James Lockette Hill entitled "Neptune Is an Irishman." The reason that this latter story was more appealing to me than the others is that it is very true to naval life and customs; as any one who has served in the Navy for some years such as I have would know. The way the incident in the fire room was depicted was excellent.

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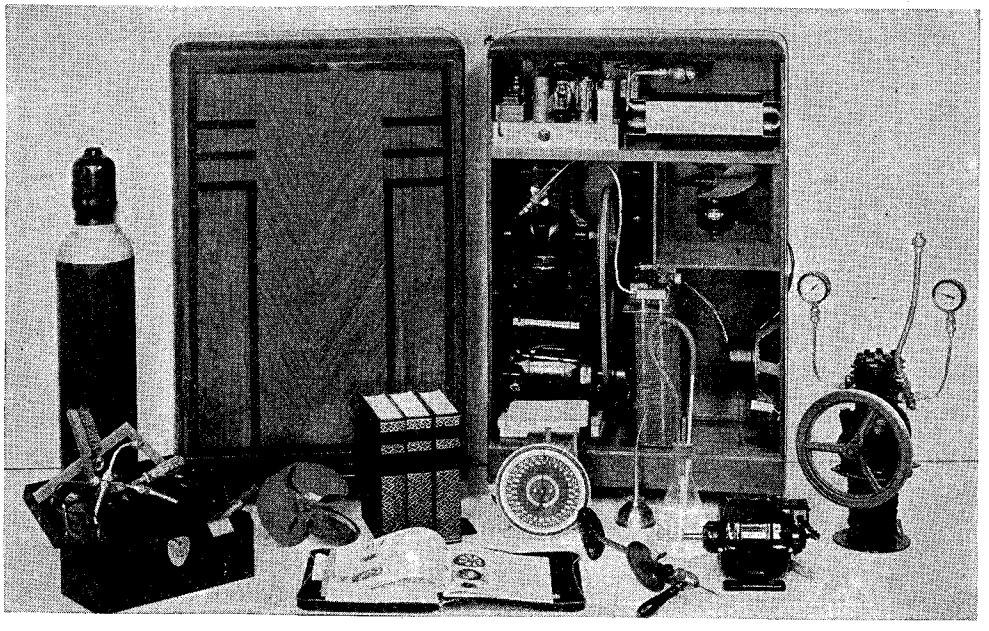

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We've gone a step forward and included in this new Air Conditioner, a 1938 Seven Tube Superheterodyne Radio Receiver complete with R.C.A. Tubes and a 10″ Dynamic Speaker. This combination Air Conditioner and Radio is a natural for either home or office use.

Associated Air Conditioning Institute,
433 E. Erie St. Dept. MS-68, Chicago, Ill.

Gentlemen: Please send me your Free Book and complete details on how I can get into AIR CONDITIONING. No obligation.

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VACU-MATIC SCORES AGAIN!

BOB McKENZIE

TRANSCONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE CHAMPION
COAST TO COAST

WESTERN UNION TIMED

NEW YORK TO LOS ANGELES 84 HRS.-40 MIN.

LOS ANGELES TO NEW YORK 97 HRS.-36 MIN.

CANADA 10,000 MILES 10 DAYS

LOS ANGELES TO NEW YORK AND RETURN 191 HRS.-52 MIN.

WASHINGTON, D.C. TO MEXICO CITY 62 HRS.-27 MIN.

LOS ANGELES TO PHOENIX 6 HRS.-10 MIN.

MUROC DRYLAKE 1987 MI. IN 1 DAY

LOS ANGELES TO SAVANNAH, GA. 29 HRS.-27 MIN.

HALIFAX, N.S. TO VANCOUVER, B. C. 69 HRS.-31 MIN.

Vacu-matic Carburetor Co.
7617 W. State St.
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a 1936 Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor control, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirt nine hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Western Union, which gave me an average speed of 59.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 18 1/3 miles per gallon on gaso- line.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased my gas mileage 3 1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 60 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

After this experience with Vacu-matic, you can depend that on my future speed runs across country that I will be depending on Vacu-matic to give me the same added performance it has proven on this last record breaking drive.

Yours very truly,

Sets New Coast-to-Chicago Record

New Supercharge Principle SAVES GAS

MORE POWER - MORE SPEED
FASTER PICK-UP - - NEW LIFE

ESTABLISHING new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic again scores in a new speed record established by Bob McKenzie transcontinental automobile champion. Los Angeles to Chicago — 2,322 miles in 39 hours and 42 minutes— driving 75 and 80 to maintain a speed average of 59.7 miles per hour!

Here is speed—a gruelling grind—where quick accelaration, greater top speed — and less stops for gasoline mean those precious moments saved that make new speed records possible

The same Vacu-matic that helped Bob McKenzie establish this speed record and gave him such fine gas savings is now available for all car owners. It is positively automatic—simple to install—inexpensive—and pays for itself many times over in gas savings

Automatic • • Nothing Like It!

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely AUTOMATIC and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing automatically as required. No idling troubles—no carburetor adjustments necessary. It is so simple it will amaze you—so practical it will save you many dollars on gas costs.

Fits All Cars

VACU-MATIC is constructed of six parts, assembled and fused into one unit, correctly adjusted and *sealed at the factory*. Nothing to regulate. Easily attached in ten minutes.

Agents and Salesmen

VACU-MATIC offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Valuable territories now being assigned. Check and mail coupon.

The VACU-MATIC Co. Wauwatosa, Wis.

Guaranteed Gas Savings

VACU-MATIC must prove itself on every car. It is guaranteed to give worthwhile gas savings, quicker pick-up and more power, or it costs you nothing. "On my V-8 Ford it works miracles", says Ralph Fields. James Seeley —"On an International Truck on a round trip to Cleveland, 385 miles, it saved 19 gallons of gas." A. V. Grove —"On the Buick it showed 5 miles more per gallon." F. S. Peck—"I average 22 miles per gal. on my Plymouth, an increase of 7 miles, for a saving of $15.00 a month, or $180.00 a year." Wm. Lyons—"Averaged 25 miles on a gal. with a Model A Ford at 40 miles per hour."

Free Details

You owe it to yourself to know all about this remarkable discovery. Mail the coupon below. Start saving gas with VACU-MATIC and enjoy a new driving thrill! There's no obligation—so get the facts now! Write today!

— — — FREE OFFER COUPON — — —

THE VACU-MATIC COMPANY
7617-384 W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Gentlemen: Please send me full particulars concerning the Vacu-matic and details of your Free Offer. This of course does not obligate me in any way.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

☐ Check here if interested in selling proposition.

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